REPORTING AND ANALYSIS OF CHILD WELFARE STATISTICS BY THE CHILD, YOUTH AND FAMILY BRANCH OF THE YOLO COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY

SUMMARY

Since the highly publicized death of 19-day-old Justice Rees in 2015, Yolo County has made significant investments in child welfare services, from recruiting a new director for the Child, Youth and Family Branch to expanding social worker staff. Despite these efforts, however, six more Yolo County children have died at the hands of their parents in the past three years, while reports of severe child abuse, the number of children removed from their homes due to maltreatment, and the rate of reentry into foster care have increased dramatically. At the same time, the Branch has shifted more of its resources to responding quickly to reports of possible abuse, reducing the resources available for data recording and review.

The 2017-18 Yolo County Grand Jury concluded that without better data-analytic capabilities, the Child, Youth and Family Branch cannot assess the effectiveness of its interventions or identify emerging needs in a timely way. The Branch cannot efficiently determine which families require special attention based on risk factors for negative outcomes, or easily detect lapses in data entry. It cannot adequately monitor and determine if services provided to families are effective at reducing safety issues in the home. Moreover, the Branch cannot be as transparent with the public as it should be about the welfare of children who experience abuse or neglect in Yolo County.

Children who survive abuse or neglect suffer adverse outcomes throughout their lives, including impaired physical and mental health; poor school outcomes; and impaired performance as parents, with long-term effects on the next generation of children. The full range of effects of child abuse and neglect cost the county hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, not only for short-term social service interventions, but also for subsequent costs in terms of health care, school failure, drug abuse and treatment, and crime. To ensure that scarce resources are invested in ways that improve the lives of children and result in better long-term outcomes, the Child, Youth and Family Branch must have the ability to analyze thoroughly and learn from the data it collects. This requires skilled data-analytic professionals and should not fall on the shoulders of front-line social workers who are already overloaded with cases.

BACKGROUND

Several examples of extreme child abuse in Yolo County have been highly publicized:

- Case 1: Justice Rees, age 19 days, died in February 2015 after his mother, Samantha Green, under the influence of methamphetamine, spent the night outdoors with him in Ridge Cut Slough near Knights Landing.

- Case 2: Sophia, 12, and Sara, 9, were killed by their father, Hamdy Rouin, in a murder-suicide in West Sacramento on New Year's Eve in 2017.

- Case 3: Kelvin, 11, Julie, 9, and Lucas, 7, were strangled to death by their father, Robert Hodges, on September 13, 2017, in West Sacramento.

- Case 4: Aminatu-Amaya Abdul-Raafi, 4, died in Putah Creek in Winters on November 19, 2017. Her father, Markeese Leavell Carter, is in jail on charges that he drugged and sexually assaulted the child before drowning her.

Even though some of these children died before their families came to the attention of child welfare authorities, each death represents a failure of the system, sometimes due to inadequate communication and coordination between social services and law enforcement.

The challenge is immense. In 2017, more than 2,304 children were referred to the Child, Youth and Family Branch for alleged abuse or neglect. Of these cases, 1,278 met criteria for an in-person investigation by social workers (818 more than in 2016), and of these, 295 were placed in foster care. At present, some 400 children are in foster care in Yolo County.

The Child, Youth and Family Branch is required by multiple state and federal laws to collect a broad array of facts about each case. The Branch enters this data into a 20-year-old system developed and mandated by the state, known as the Child Welfare System/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), supplemented by various ancillary databases that the county has added over the years. This antiquated system is a burden to Branch social workers and although it is being revised and replaced at the state level, the next iteration is not guaranteed to help Yolo County social workers perform their jobs more effectively, and certainly not in the short run.

Trend information is generated by the California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP) at UC Berkeley under a contract with the California Department of Social Services. The CCWIP gathers data from county CWS/CMS systems statewide and mines that data to generate reports that are posted on a public website (http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare/). The reports include county-to-county comparisons, statewide averages, and trends over time. But without a dedicated team of Branch analysts trained to drill down into CCWIP reports and their own more recent data for insights into local trends and concerns, the CCWIP data are more useful for state-level monitoring than for specific monitoring and improvement at the county level.

In recent years, Yolo County has made major efforts to understand and address the issues that contribute to poor child welfare outcomes. These include a series of workshops held by the Board of Supervisors in 2016, and development of a Child Welfare Action plan later that year emphasizing the importance of databased decision-making. In addition, since January 2017, the Branch has slightly increased staff assigned to data analysis and quality assurance from 0 to 1.5 full-time-equivalents by assigning three individuals to devote part of their time to this work. However, County Health and Human Services

Agency leaders believe that 3 full-time data-analytic staff are the minimum needed to permit data-driven decision-making and effective continuous quality improvement.

APPROACH

The Grand Jury conducted interviews with representatives of the Board of Supervisors, County Counsel's Office, Child Dependency Court, Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency, and the Child, Youth and Family Branch.

The Jury also reviewed:

- California Child Welfare Indicators Project reports for Yolo County

- Transcripts of Board of Supervisors' 2016 workshops on child welfare

- California – Child and Family Services Review System Improvement Plan (8/3/15 to 3/3/20)

- California – Child and Family Services Review Annual SIP [System Improvement Plan] Progress Report (8/1/16 to 8/3/17)

- Yolo County Child Welfare Services Action Plan (revised 2/24/2017)

- Local and national news media articles about foster care and child abuse

- Social science literature about data analytics and child dependency court

DISCUSSION

The Grand Jury found that reports on the UC Berkeley CCWIP site are often based on out-of-date information, and that relying on this information can hamper progress. For example, when the Yolo County Board of Supervisors held a series of hearings on child welfare in 2016, the county's foster care reentry rate had been rising rapidly, but this trend did not become evident to Branch staff until the following year. The reentry rate reflects cases in which a child who has been removed from the home and placed in foster care is returned to his or her family only to be removed again within one year because of repeated abuse or neglect. Such cases indicate that the families in question did not receive adequate services to address their problems, or are incapable of safely caring for a child.

In addition, the CCWIP trend data is only as good as the information entered at the county level – and Yolo County has experienced significant lapses in entering data. For example, for several years, required information about foster children's health and dental care was not consistently recorded because of turnover in the public health nurse position responsible for entering this information.

Even when data are entered correctly and in a timely manner, mining the data for information to guide practice is difficult. For example, Child, Youth and Family Branch staff recently completed a review of 30 foster care reentry cases in an effort to understand

why the reentry rate had doubled. The case-by-case review required about 5 hours per case. Better data-analytic capabilities could shorten this to 30 minutes, according to estimates from Branch staff.

Currently, social workers do not receive automated alerts that could stave off crises. For example, group homes do not keep a foster child if the psychotropic medication prescribed for that child runs out and the order for the medication has expired. An automatic alert could help social workers ensure that medication orders remain current.

Outmoded data-analytic systems, data entry lapses, and a shortage of data-analytic capabilities also make it difficult for the Branch to provide the public with something the Grand Jury deems desirable: a website dashboard that keeps the public informed of challenges, successes and needs in child welfare in Yolo County. At present, until reports to the Board of Supervisors are presented at Board meetings and reported in local newspapers, the public is unaware of how many children are being removed from their homes, for what reasons, and with what outcomes. The public does not know how many children are in foster care at any particular time, or how many children find foster homes within and outside the county. Crucially, without timely data, citizens are not sufficiently aware of the problems associated with child abuse and neglect, including the importance of recruiting new foster parents. When there are too few foster parents available in Yolo County, children removed from abusive or neglectful homes must be placed in foster homes outside the county, making it more difficult for those children to see their friends and family members, and more costly and time-intensive for Yolo County social workers to keep track of the far-flung cases.

Although the Grand Jury is aware of the burdens already placed on the Child, Youth and Family Branch, which has made important progress during the past two years in implementing action items spelled out in its Child Welfare Action Plan, the Grand Jury has concluded that the Branch needs a dedicated unit for data analysis and quality improvement. The goal of this unit would be to streamline data collection, storage, and analysis, and to summarize the data in ways that make it easier to answer quality-control questions. At present, such questions are time-consuming and onerous for staff to answer; for example: What risk factors predict negative outcomes, and how can families with those risk factors be identified and given additional attention to prevent tragedies? When services are provided to parents, how effective are the services? When services are not effective, why? What emerging trends (for example, changes in opioid abuse rates within the county, or impacts of marijuana legalization) deserve attention? When there are mistakes resulting in harm to children, how well are they understood and corrected in future cases?

None of this discussion is meant to question the sincerity or dedication of Yolo County social service workers. The Health and Human Services Agency staff members who were interviewed by the Grand Jury realize that the highly publicized deaths of children, mentioned above, have caused the Branch to put the vast majority of its efforts into responding quickly to new cases, and this has stretched the already inadequate resources available for data analysis and quality assessments. The interviewed staff members

heartily agreed that creating a "continuous quality improvement unit" is essential to better protecting Yolo County children from harm and using existing and future resources wisely.

FINDINGS

F1. The CWS/CMF database system used by the Child, Youth and Family Branch was introduced in 1997 and is awkward and outdated, requiring social workers to spend nearly half their time on data entry and making analyses difficult. The state is working on a new-generation data system, known as CWS CARES (California Automated Response and Engagement System). However, delivery of this new system, promised in 2017, may still be several years away.

F2. Social workers in the Child, Youth and Family Branch of the Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency have extremely important and stressful jobs that affect many aspects of our community, from schools to unemployment rolls to prisons. When social workers are required to grapple with antiquated and cumbersome data systems, their morale suffers and the time they can devote to keeping Yolo County children safe is diminished.

F3. Child welfare staff cannot efficiently and effectively monitor and identify trends in such variables as reentry into the foster care system, timely medical and dental interventions, or the role of parental drug abuse. Because of this, Child, Youth and Family Branch staff, along with county supervisors and the general public, can be blindsided by sudden spikes in negative outcomes that make headlines and generate reactive responses, to the detriment of efforts to systematically improve child welfare services and outcomes.

F4. The County's Child Welfare Action Plan calls for continuous, data-driven quality improvement, but the Child, Youth and Family Branch does not have sufficient data-analytic resources to fully engage in continuous quality improvement. The paucity of data-analytic resources means that the Branch cannot easily provide regular updates to the public concerning trends, challenges, and successes. Instead, the public tends to hear about the child welfare system only when there is a crisis (such as the death of a child), creating negative perceptions that may interfere with recruiting foster parents and other kinds of community support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. By October 31, 2018, the Child, Youth and Family Branch of the Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency should submit a proposal to the Board of Supervisors for a continuous quality improvement unit charged with streamlining data collection and introducing tools that will enable the Branch to use data to drive decisions and measure success.

R2. By January 1, 2019, The Board of Supervisors should provide funding for a viable continuous quality improvement unit.

R3. By July 1, 2019, the Child, Youth and Family Branch should create a website dashboard that keeps the public informed of child welfare challenges, successes, and needs, including information related to the need for more foster parents in the county.

REQUIRED AND REQUESTED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

REQUIRED RESPONSE

From the following governing body:

- Yolo County Board of Supervisors – F2, F3, F4; R2

INVITED RESPONSE

- Director, Child, Youth and Family Branch, Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency – F1, F2, F3, F4; R1, R3

Note: The governing body indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

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