

**SUBMITTAL TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS  
COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE, STATE OF CALIFORNIA**



ITEM: 3.36  
(ID # 19582)

**MEETING DATE:**  
Tuesday, July 12, 2022

**FROM :** SUPERVISOR KAREN SPIEGEL AND SUPERVISOR KEVIN JEFFRIES :

**SUBJECT:** SUPERVISOR KAREN SPIEGEL AND SUPERVISOR KEVIN JEFFRIES: Receive and file the Larson LLP and Civil Grand Jury Reports Related to Services Provided to Vulnerable Children and Adults and Affirm the Role of the Ad Hoc Committee for Inter-Departmental Systems Improvement for the Protection of Vulnerable Children and Adults in Implementing Recommendations.

**RECOMMENDED MOTION:** That the Board of Supervisors:

1. Receive and file the report and recommendations prepared by Larson LLP entitled "Riverside County Programs and Services for Children in Foster Care, Transitioning Youth, and Adults Under Conservatorship: Assessment & Recommendations."
2. Receive and file the Civil Grand Jury's report and recommendations entitled "Enhanced Organizational Culture and Leadership: Children Services Division Dedicated to Protecting Riverside County Children."
3. Affirm that the Board of Supervisors' Ad Hoc Committee for Interdepartmental Systems Improvement for the Protection of Vulnerable Children and Adults is the central organizing entity for overseeing the implementation of the recommendations made from Larson LLP, the Civil Grand Jury, and any other opportunities for improvement that are identified.

Continued on page 2

**ACTION:Policy**

  
Supervisor Karen Spiegel, Supervisor 2nd District 7/8/2022

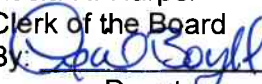
  
Supervisor Kevin Jeffries, Vice Chair 7/8/2022

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**MINUTES OF THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

On motion of Supervisor Spiegel, seconded by Supervisor Jeffries and duly carried, IT WAS ORDERED that the above matter is approved as recommended.

Ayes: Jeffries, Spiegel, Washington and Hewitt  
Nays: None  
Absent: Perez  
Date: July 12, 2022  
xc: BOS District 2, BOS District 1, EO

Kecia R. Harper  
Clerk of the Board  
By:   
Deputy

**SUBMITTAL TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE,  
STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

**RECOMMENDED MOTION:** That the Board of Supervisors:

4. Direct the Executive Office to work with the Department of Public Social Services' Children Services Division, County Counsel, and Human Resources to develop a response to the Civil Grand Jury report and return to the Board of Supervisors on or before September 20, 2022.
5. Direct the Executive Office to work with the Department of Public Social Services (Children Services Division and Self Sufficiency), RUHS Behavioral Health (Office of Public Guardian), Housing and Workforce Solutions, County Counsel, Human Resources, appointed counsel, and other involved partners and return to the Board of Supervisors Ad Hoc Committee in 60 days with a report on the status of ongoing efforts to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and adults and a plan to implement new recommendations.
6. Direct the Executive Office to provide the Board of Supervisors with updates from the Ad Hoc Committee and to return to the Board with policy recommendations as necessary.

**BACKGROUND:**

**Summary**

The County of Riverside operates a system of programs and services working towards fulfillment of its mission to support and improve the health, safety, well-being and independence of our county's adults and children in ways that strengthen and preserve families, encourage personal responsibility, and foster independence.

In recent years, the County of Riverside, under direction of the Board of Supervisors, has worked diligently to support new departmental leadership in enacting evidence-based, welfare focused systems improvements and transformations which positively impact the County's ability to provide care for and to protect the most vulnerable in our communities.

High profile incidents have spotlighted areas where the County must direct attention and resources to support transformation and enhancement of department efforts including the way in which multiple departments work across the system to create integrated service delivery.

Sometime last year, the 2021-2022 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury began an investigation to understand the current organizational culture of the Children Services Division of the Department of Public Social Services and to learn as much as possible about their work in the County. To the extent possible, their focus was to ascertain if the current policies and procedures are effective in meeting the challenges faced by social services practitioners, their supervisors and the County entities that support them. Last week, the report was published with seven findings and six recommendations. These findings reflect the dedicated efforts of Department and County leadership and the collaborative multi-departmental enhancements to policies and procedures which have resulted in a culture of strengthened accountability and improved protective practices.

**SUBMITTAL TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE,  
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In October of last year, Larson LLP, a law firm led by former U.S. District Court Judge Stephen G. Larson, was engaged by the County to conduct an independent and comprehensive investigation to assess the County's care of the Turpin siblings and, more broadly, the services provided by the County to all children in foster care, transitioning youth, and adults under conservatorship. Late last month, the report was finished, with court ordered redactions finalized last week. The report is more than six hundred pages and includes almost eighty recommendations. This publicly available report includes court-ordered redactions to information deemed as confidential by the court pertaining to specific case information that is not publicly available.

Broadly speaking, the two reports focus on the need to recruit and retain well qualified staff, reduce caseloads, and improve communication and collaboration between the various departments, programs, partners, and stakeholders. The two reports also reflect that much work has been done in the last two years to improve in these areas, but more must be done.

To drive the continued systemic improvement forward, the Larson LLP report recommends that the Ad Hoc Committee created by the Board of Supervisors on December 7, 2021, to assess opportunities for inter-departmental systems improvement for the protection of vulnerable children and adults be the central organizing entity for overseeing the implementation of the recommendations. As co-chairs, Supervisor Spiegel and Supervisor Jeffries have met regularly with involved departments on systems improvements, received regular status reports and updates from Larson LLP, and ensured full and complete access to any and all relevant information to support the inquiry. Overseeing the implementation of recommendations is consistent with the mission of this Ad Hoc Committee.

**Impact on Residents and Businesses**

Implementation of recommendations for improving the care and protective services to vulnerable children and adults within our care will lead to more positive outcomes.

  
Jeff Van Wagenen, County Executive Officer 7/8/2022

# ***Enhanced Organizational Culture and Leadership: Children Services Division Dedicated to Protecting Riverside County Children***

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## **SUMMARY**

The 2021-2022 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) began their investigation by reading through several news articles about recent child deaths (2019 and 2020), along with other reports of child abuse and neglect that had tragic outcomes. The details of the cases could not be accessed due to confidentiality laws. Instead, the Grand Jury investigation focused on Child Protective Services (CPS) policies and procedures, as revised, and the “process issues” identified in a published external review (referenced on pages 3 and 9).

The Grand Jury endeavored to gain an understanding of the current CPS organizational culture and to learn as much as possible about their work in the County. To the extent possible, our focus was to ascertain if the current policies and procedures are effective in meeting the challenges faced by the Social Services Practitioners (SSPs), their supervisors and the County entities that support them.

The Grand Jury also searched for unequivocal evidence that validates a statement made by Riverside County’s spokesperson in a July 2020 *Los Angeles Times* article, specifically:

***“[Riverside]...County made several improvements since late 2019 to the County’s Children’s Services Division, including leadership changes and a shift in culture toward greater accountability and safer practices and outcomes.”<sup>1</sup>***

Therefore, the major points of interest we examined in our investigation, and in interviews, were as follows:

- Warrant for Removal process (obtaining court orders to remove a child from a dangerous environment)
- Use of the Structured Decision Making (SDM)<sup>®</sup> to ascertain the level of safety and risk in cases assigned for investigation
- “Staffing” procedures to “promote” an investigation, to seek guidance, and to make appropriate decisions to protect children
- Caseload management, standards and strategies for reducing SSPs workloads

In this report, the Grand Jury provides recommendations to address its findings in each of these areas.

A look into historical perspectives included certain reports which were important to our understanding of how CPS has evolved over the past decade. Those reports are summarized in the BACKGROUND section, which follows.



## **BACKGROUND**

The mission of Riverside County's Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) is to "support and improve the health, safety, well-being and independence of our County's individuals and families."<sup>2</sup> DPSS develops and executes programs and policies, in accordance with many state and federal laws, to protect the most vulnerable members of our community: the aged, the developmentally disabled, and the children.

Riverside County's Children's Services Division (CSD) is a major component of DPSS and is generally known as Child Protective Services (CPS). Working under strict adherence to numerous state mandates, and a myriad of other statutory or legislative regulations, CPS has evolved over decades as the County's principal agent for protecting children from abuse, neglect and loss of life.

Riverside County CPS has a total staff of over 1,100 employees, with nearly 600 social workers, also known as Social Services Practitioners (SSPs). There are three levels of SSPs: SSP I, SSP II and SSP III.\* These are highly educated, trained professionals who have an essential duty to act. In interviews, these workers expressed a sincere and genuine desire to ensure it's done right, despite the disquieting press reporting and overwhelming workloads.

### **2012-2013:**

On June 27, 2013, the **2012-2013 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury** submitted a report that included their Findings and Recommendations, which was duly recorded and responded to by the Riverside County Department of Public Social Services/Children's Services Division (DPSS/CSD).<sup>3</sup>

The Grand Jury identified specific areas in which Child Protective Services (CPS) needed to improve, specifically how it handled child abuse and neglect cases, deficiencies in training, and unmanageable caseloads.

The most critical areas identified in the report were the policies and procedures followed by CPS investigators to assess and respond to the level of danger a child was exposed to in a home. It further concluded that social workers were "overloaded", which limited their ability to thoroughly and properly complete investigations. According to the report, some workers reported having up to forty cases and were "overloaded" with paperwork.

The findings & recommendations are briefly outlined in the INVESTIGATION section.

### **2016-2018:**

During this period, DPSS/CSD appeared to be in a state of turmoil and under a high degree of scrutiny. The department underwent major leadership changes at the top of the organization,

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\* Brief descriptions can be found in the Bibliography section of this report

which could have been attributed to these two significant cases resulting from the department's failure in protecting children from abuse:<sup>4,5</sup>

- March 2017: a three-year-old suffered severe neglect and, reportedly, was found in a filthy home, hugging her dead infant sibling. CPS had failed to act. Reportedly, a \$1.375 million settlement was reached
- November 2017: a 13-year-old girl suffered repeated sexual abuse and rape. She was impregnated by her mother's live-in boyfriend. CPS failed to protect her. According to this rape victim's attorney, she was awarded \$10 million

In these cases, the complaints allege that the social workers "repeatedly visited the homes of the victims, but failed to stop the abuse and closed the investigations prematurely." They also alleged that the workers were negligent and in violation of the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (*California Penal Code §11164-11174.3*).

*"The Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA) passed in 1980. Amendments have expanded the definition of child abuse and the persons required to report. In California, certain professionals are required to report known or suspected child abuse."*

### **September 2018**

Riverside County's Director of the Child Services Division (CSD) resigned amidst these civil cases and allegations of continued severe child abuse, even after CPS had "finished" their investigations.

Subsequently, the Riverside County's Executive Office hired an "outside expert in child and family services" to conduct a review of the Riverside County's Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) Child Services Division (CSD). A report, "External Review Analysis and Process Improvement" was published in October 2019.<sup>6</sup>

*"The purpose of the review was to perform a root-cause analysis for CSD related claims and lawsuits and institute actions resulting in safer and improved outcomes for children.....and offer advice and counsel to the County Counsel's Office and CSD."*

The findings & recommendations are briefly outlined in the INVESTIGATION section.

### **2019-2020**

Following are abridged accounts of tragedies, caused by child abuse and neglect, in Riverside County, as reported by prominent journalists of the Southern California News Group (SCNG), and other respected daily newspapers. The articles underscore the failures of CPS's decisions and the actions taken. Biased or not, these cases are tragic and saddening to read.

A 17-year-old female was a foster child with disabilities. She died on April 6, 2019. The foster home's owner faced a second-degree murder charge for her death.<sup>7</sup>

Riverside County [CPS] "effectively signed [*her*] death warrant by placing her in a foster home dogged by decades of complaints..."

According to this report, the California State Department of Social Services conducted an investigation and found *that the foster home "neglected to obtain emergency medical care in a timely manner..."*

An 8-year-old boy was last seen alive in March 2019. He was born with a birth defect called bladder exstrophy. His bladder was on the outside of his body and he had problems controlling his bladder. His body has yet to be found.<sup>8</sup>

According to one of several media reports on this case, CPS had 18 months of reports, detailing abuse and neglect. The SSPs decided those reports of abuse were either ***"unfounded," inconclusive, or left open (no final determination).*** The SSP wrote in her report that ***"no children are likely to be in immediate danger of serious harm"*** in that household. Therefore, the children were not removed from the home.

Testimony before a Riverside County Criminal Grand Jury exposed the agency's failure to take decisive action to protect this child from torture, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and from being brutally killed. The SSPs checked on the boy at least three times before his disappearance. They admitted that they were aware of the child's hands being "zip-tied behind his back", that he was "dunked in cold water", and that he was "sent to school without pants."<sup>9</sup>

The disappearance of this child is considered a **"no-body homicide,"** according to Riverside County District Attorney Mark Hestrin.<sup>10</sup>

A 14-month-old girl died of a fentanyl overdose in 2020. Allegedly, CPS failed to remove the child from her drug-addicted mother despite warnings from hospital staff.

According to a lawsuit before the U.S. District Court in Riverside, medical staff (**mandatory reporting**) contacted CPS to **alert** them that this newborn, and the mother, tested positive for amphetamines, barbiturates and opiates. The child's grandmother, through an attorney stated: "As a result of their failure to act, this kid is dead. I pin it on them."

According to a news report, the SSPs, with the concurrence of their supervisor, allowed the newborn to stay with the mother and advised her to participate in a "voluntary safety plan." "Instead of filing a petition or seeking a (court order), which is what the social worker should have done, she cut the kid loose to the mother and said, 'Go take some drug classes.'" <sup>11</sup>

The SSPs left the newborn in the care of her "heroin-addicted mother", and with their supervisor's approval, the case was "closed." Fourteen months later, when the child stopped breathing, Riverside police responded to a 911 call. She was taken to a hospital where she died from a fentanyl overdose. The parents are charged with murder and child abuse.

Riverside County's spokesperson claimed that the County could not comment on the case, but offered the following statement:

***"Our social workers are dedicated to best practices and keeping children safe. We are saddened when a child suffers an untimely death and reflective about the circumstances surrounding that death," ... "Our hearts go out to [her] family and loved ones."***



## METHODOLOGY

- I. Developed an Investigation Plan: Defined what is being investigated; prepared lists of interviewees and the interview schedule; defined the milestones/timelines/goals for completing various stages of the investigation.
  
- II. Conducted Research: there is a considerable amount of research papers, articles, and publications on the subject of CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT, which are accessible on the internet and other sources. Only a partial list is shown in the BIBLIOGRAPHY, along with other reports and reference material we studied.
  
- III. Consulted with Legal Experts, Advisors, and Riverside County Departmental Authorities:
  - a. Riverside County District Attorney's Office:
    - Deputy District Attorney
    - Chief Deputy District Attorney Major Crimes
  - b. Criminal Information Technician, Riverside County Sheriff's Department - Information Services Bureau (ISB)/Records
  - c. California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP), School of Social Welfare - University of California, Berkeley
  - d. Correctional Sergeant, Riverside County Sheriff's Department, Professional Standards Bureau
  - e. Senior Legal Analyst, California Department of Social Services, Information, Technology and Administrative Litigation Branch, Information, Audits and Personnel Unit
  
- IV. Conducted Interviews: Through a series of interviews, the Grand Jury learned about the roles and responsibilities of SSPs, "front-end" (Investigative Services) and "back-end", (Continuing Services) and the CPS organization in general. The interviews included:
  - a. Riverside County District Attorney Investigator
  - b. Chief Deputy District Attorney Major Crimes - Child Death Review Team
  - c. Riverside County Office of County Counsel, Chief Deputy County Counsel (CDCC)
  - d. Employee and Labor Relations Manager, Riverside County Human Resources, Employee and Labor Relations Division
  - e. Assistant Chief Executive Officer/Director of Human Resources, Riverside County Human Resources Director
  - f. Human Resources Analyst, Riverside County Human Resources, Employee and Labor Relations Division
  - g. Assistant Human Resources Director, Riverside County Human Resources
  - h. Principal Management Analyst, Riverside County Executive Office
  - i. Riverside County Public Information Officer
  - j. Assistant Chief Executive Officer (ACEO), Riverside County Human Services/ Director, Department of Public Social Services (DPSS)



- k. Assistant Director, Riverside County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS), Children's Services Division
- l. Administrative Services Officer, Community and Government Relations, Riverside County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS)
- m. SSP interviews were selected at random from each of the operating regions that report to five Deputy Directors. We were specifically interested in speaking with case-carrying SSP IIIs in Investigative Services, but also included SSPs I and II. Approximately 30<sup>†</sup> interviews were conducted on site at the following locations:
  - DPSS offices - Riverside
  - CPS office - Blythe
  - CPS office - Riverside (La Sierra)
  - CPS office - Temecula
  - CPS office - Moreno Valley
  - CPS office - Indio
- n. Regional Manager and Deputy Director interviews were held at the Grand Jury office (6)<sup>‡</sup>



## INVESTIGATION

Regarding the foregoing reports of the children who suffered, or died, as a result of abuse or neglect, DPSS/CSD management is prohibited from directly and authoritatively responding to the various editorials and articles. Officially, the organizations cannot provide a response due to legal constraints. Following is the statute and related codes that prohibit public information officials from answering questions from reporters, or others that are specific to a client or case:

*“Disclosure of information concerning children or dependent adults who may have been at risk of or suffered abuse and neglect is expressly prohibited by Welfare and Institutions Code sections 308, 827, 5328, 5328.04, 10051, 10053, 10850 HIPAA, the California Confidentiality of Medical Information Act (Civil Code section 56.10 et seq.), Penal Code sections 11167 and 11167.5, Health and Safety Code section 1536, and Family Code sections 9200 and 9203. This also includes records that are exempt pursuant to Government Code section 6254(c) that are personnel, medical or similar files, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. The County is prohibited by law from releasing the requested information without the requesting party first having obtained an order of the court.”*

The regulation, of course, limited the amount of information available to the Grand Jury in its inquiries. The SSPs we spoke with either refused to answer our questions or claimed no knowledge of the cases. However, the news groups apparently had some sources willing to divulge information, and their reporting provided some insights for further analysis in this study.

In an article published (April 2022) in the Press-Enterprise,<sup>12</sup> Riverside County Supervisor Kevin Jefferies made some very significant statements concerning the lack of transparency and poor

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<sup>†</sup> To preserve confidentiality, only approximate numbers are indicated

<sup>‡</sup> To preserve confidentiality, only approximate numbers are indicated

coordination between agencies of the County. His comments were in reference to an ongoing independent investigation.<sup>§</sup> However, due to their relevance to this study, his statements are included below, in their entirety:

*The Board of Supervisors “expressed frustration at what members said were legal barriers preventing a full accounting...as to how the County protects vulnerable children and adults.” Supervisor Kevin Jeffries: “It is the most frustrating experience in my time I’ve had on the Board of Supervisors is to be told you’re responsible as an elected official to make sure all these things run smoothly and you have the right people in place, but you can’t ask any questions about how they do their job or how effective they are or the problems they face...”*

*“My experience in our ad-hoc committee and in our closed session to try to get to the root of some of the challenges we face was met with ‘I can’t tell you that, supervisor. I’m sorry; I can’t disclose that, supervisor. I can’t tell you how it happened, supervisor,’” he said.*

*He later added: “We are asking employees to accomplish a mission that is almost impossible to accomplish under current state rules and regulations, where you cannot ask another agency, within the same family, to help you address a need of a child. One agency can’t ask another agency to help because it’s violating (privacy).”*

Riverside County’s experience of incidents related to child abuse, child neglect, and child fatalities resulting from those behaviors, is not unique. Various research reports\*\* on this subject, and several news articles, indicate that it happens recurrently throughout the State of California and the nation.

The SCNG reported that Los Angeles County has had extensive studies of child fatality cases, most notably the Gabriel Fernandez murder. In a 2019 audit report, the California State Auditor’s office concluded “...that the [DPSS] department unnecessarily risks the health and safety of the children in its care because it does not consistently complete child abuse and neglect investigations, and related safety and risk assessments, on time or accurately. As a result, the department leaves some children in unsafe and abusive situations for months.”<sup>13</sup>

In a June 2021 news conference, Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer said that the “initial facts” in the case of Santa Ana parents who were accused of stabbing and beating their 2-year-old daughter were “beyond disturbing.”<sup>14</sup> He added:

***“Children should be surrounded by love, not violence, and it is our responsibility as a society to stand up and protect our children when their own parents have abdicated that responsibility.”***

The SSPs we interviewed certainly echoed that sentiment in their comments and stated that they work diligently to reflect it in their performance. However, they expressed some frustration over increasingly heavy caseloads, which sometimes hinder their ability to properly conduct their investigations, which we probed further in our interviews.

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<sup>§</sup> Investigation by Stephen G. Larson’s law firm in the wake of an ABC “20/20” special on the 13 Turpin children

<sup>\*\*</sup> These can be found in the Bibliography section of this report

In our interviews with the SSPs, and the managers we spoke with, we engaged them in a conversation about certain focus areas from the 2012-2013 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury Report and the External Review Analysis and Process Improvement Report (2019).

The reports are highly detailed and lengthy. Therefore, only the focus points of this study are discussed in condensed fashion, as follows:

## **2012-2013 CIVIL GRAND JURY REPORT** **FINDINGS and RESPONSES**

The Civil Grand Jury conducted a detailed investigation of the CPS practices and policies. From its findings, the Civil Grand Jury made six recommendations, which are abridged here for brevity (the entire report is available on the Riverside County Civil Grand Jury website).<sup>15</sup>

**INVESTIGATIONS:** The 2012-2013 Civil Grand Jury felt that certain terms and tools, critical to effective investigative work, were not well defined or explained in the policies and procedures, such as:

- Global Assessment
- Collateral Contacts
- Structured Decision Making (SDM)<sup>®</sup>
- Criminal Background Checks
- Referral alerts
- History alerts

*[The definitions of the above terms are included in the GLOSSARY section of this report].*

DPSS/CSD indicated in their responses that the Grand Jury's recommendations, with a few exceptions, had been implemented, or would be implemented. This was confirmed during our interviews with the SSPs and managers we spoke with, along with our reading of the applicable policies and procedures in the current *Child Services Division Handbook*, which is extensive.

**TRAINING:** According to the responses from DPSS/CSD, the recommendations from the 2012-2013 Civil Grand Jury were implemented. CPS uses an "existing core induction training structure" and managers require that newly-hired social workers maintain a "training caseload with mentors" until they develop the required skills. Further, "new staff is teamed with a veteran", and all workers are supervised and participate in regular case consultations.

**CASELOADS:** The 2012-2013 Civil Grand Jury suggested that caseloads comply with guidelines set by California Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) 18994.4 (3) (c) [ "*Caseloads that are balanced in size, not to exceed 25 cases per home visitor, and intensity (service intensity varies with client need)*" ]

DPSS/CSD clarified the Grand Jury's interpretation of WIC 18994.4 (3) (c), explaining that the code only applies to the California Families and Children "Home Visitor" programs. It does not refer to Child Welfare workers (CPS).

## **EXTERNAL REVIEW ANALYSIS and PROCESS IMPROVEMENT** **(October 2019)**<sup>16</sup>

This independent review of complaints and claims identified certain categories of “Process Issues” from 2008 to 2018. The issues were placed into five “overarching” categories. For the purposes of this review, we examined the following process issues:

- Wrongful Removal (with and without a warrant) of a child
- Failure to remove and to adequately investigate or respond to referrals

**Wrongful Removal of a Child** - according to the report, it was the “most common category of claim”, which included “wrongful removal with a warrant”, “wrongful removal without a warrant”, and “unclear” as to with or without a warrant. These claims also included allegations that social workers violated practices, policies or procedures.

A warrant is an order from a Juvenile Court judge that orders CSD and law enforcement to carry out actions in the best interest of a child. As explained in the external report, County Counsel implemented a new warrant process effective January 2015 and the number of wrongful removal claims filed declined. However, apparently the new warrant policy “produced unintended consequences over the next four-year period”, such as:

- a) Duplication of work
- b) Process inefficiencies
- c) Lack of clarity of roles of County Counsel and SSPs in a child removal action

Beginning in May 2019, County Counsel and DPSS/CSD management collaborated on actions needed to correct those issues. Their work led to the following corrective actions:

- a) Roles and responsibilities to be clearly defined
- b) Re-education of SSPs on the tools and the authority needed to make the appropriate decisions to protect children
- c) DPSS/CSD executives and County Counsel to be focused on practice and policy issues
- d) Deliver “integrated training modules” for frontline social workers, supervisors, managers, deputy directors
- e) County Counsel to initiate updated training plans to strengthen the practices in conducting investigations and assessing safety and risk

**Failure to remove and to adequately investigate or respond to referrals** - the investigator’s analysis of actual cases where these process issues occurred, revealed an immediate need for corrective actions, including “re-education in Structured Decision Making” and for clear, consistent communication between front-line SSPs, the supervisors and County Counsel. The fundamental remedy for these types of process issues was clarification of roles and responsibilities.

Therefore, beginning in May 2019, according to the report, DPSS/CSD began ongoing collaboration with The Casey Family Foundation, a nationally-respected organization in child welfare. An action plan was developed, as follows:

- The CSD Quality Review Team assumed an expanded responsibility for auditing “risk management cases, critical incidences, high risk, very-high risk and other targeted proactive reviews”
- Implemented a process to provide SSPs consistent, meaningful feedback
- Developed a tool to consistently communicate and measure performance
- Working closely with Human Resources on addressing personnel issues in a timely manner

The report concluded that DPSS/CSD made “significant strides” from May to October 2019 in enhancing their work towards the protection of children. The current Assistant CEO of Human Services/Director of Department of Public Social Services and County Counsel worked together to ensure that SSPs have the support and the tools they need in order to make the right decisions.

Based on our investigation, the Grand Jury concurs that the current DPSS/CSD leadership team is effectively promoting a culture of accountability and strong commitment to CSD’s stated values.

In its investigation, the 2021-2022 Grand Jury, through detailed interviews, examined the interfacing relationships with both County Counsel and Human Resources. Our observations are outlined in the following sections, along with an analysis of the caseload management practices of DPSS/CSD.

### RIVERSIDE COUNTY OFFICE OF COUNTY COUNSEL

In this report, reference is made to “County Counsel.” For clarification, it is short-hand to refer to the legal advisors who are members of the formal organization, Riverside County Office of County Counsel, not the individual.

The Grand Jury interviewed the Chief Deputy County Counsel (CDCC) who is most familiar with and directly engaged with DPSS/CSD. In our discussion, we learned she was not only the proponent of the warrant process changes and enhancements, she assumed a leadership role in improving the working relationship between County Counsel and DPSS/CSD.

The CDCC we spoke with had been promoted into the role in May 2019. Working in concert with the Assistant CEO, Riverside County Human Services/DPSS, their “brainstorming” efforts served to breakdown “barriers.” The barriers she described included:

- A “time consuming” process
- The “levels of review”, predicated on the Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments (U.S. Constitution), which imposes “layers of review” for the protection of parental rights
- No after-hours process, which often stalled the process, and
- Too many hands involved

A significant improvement was in the “quality of work product”, referring to the preparation of Probable Cause Statements (PCS). The documentation must show “legal sufficiency”, along with the evidence that supports each element of the PCS. Every case-carrying SSP III we interviewed

expressed appreciation for the support they are receiving from County Counsel in this very important step towards obtaining a court order for removal of a child.

Through our interviews, it was learned that not all of the SSPs are familiar with this process. Generally, they are the non-case carrying (those not involved in specific cases) SSPs. County Counsel believes that all SSPs need to learn to complete a PCS, as it is important for it to be legally sufficient.

According to the CDCC, in terms of the work done by CPS, “8% is bad press.” Warrant denials are “only 1 in 100”, which reflects a vast improvement. She believes the process is now more streamlined (“freed up”), whereas in the past it was difficult to do successfully. Working collaboratively with DPSS/CSD, the barriers have been removed, and they are now presenting a clear picture for the judge to approve.

County Counsel, specifically the CDCC we spoke with, took the necessary steps to “laydown the deep track” in training. Training that has been developed, and is currently being delivered by County Counsel, includes monthly “Brown Bag” meetings. The topics are selected by County Counsel, which may include “hot issues,” issues in the courts, documentation, and analysis of hypothetical cases with the SSPs. These meetings are mandatory and count towards the SSPs annual mandatory training requirement.

During the “core induction training” phase, County Counsel emphasizes cooperation and team work, fact-finding, and legal issues. It is a full day of training on those subjects.

In the SSP interviews, it was confirmed that “core induction training” of a period of 9 weeks is mandatory. However, the actual training content could not be clearly articulated by the SSPs. Also, while new SSPs are paired with an experienced SSP for a certain period of time, they were unclear as to the prescribed time for the pairing.

The training is currently supplemented by 3 weeks of training conducted internally by DPSS/CSD.

The risk of liability for law enforcement was another concern. She explained that she worked diligently with the courts and the sheriff to reduce some of those hurdles. With their liability concerns addressed, law enforcement now plays a more active role with CPS in the warrant process and, as a result, the SSPs feel more supported and confident with the procedures.

County Counsel described the working relationship with DPSS/CSD as an “in-house counsel”, or an “attorney-client”, relationship. The SSPs we interviewed spoke very highly of this working relationship, expressed appreciation for the improved communication and support, and for the training conducted on a regular, formal basis, by County Counsel in key areas. The Grand Jury also learned that this key individual was in the process of leaving their current role and would be replaced.

## **HUMAN RESOURCES**

The Grand Jury interviewed members of the Riverside County Human Resources Department. We discussed 2019-2021 statistics, along with their analysis, in the following categories:

- SSP Turnover (average rate of turnover and identification of patterns and trends)
- Disciplinary Actions (performance concerns and actions taken)
- Recruiting (number of positions filled and average “time-to-fill”)

The objective for obtaining this information was to ascertain the degree of negative impact on caseloads, as well as the potential for derailing key initiatives taken by DPSS/CSD management to meet their stated mission of protecting children.

An average turnover rate of 32% makes it more challenging for DPSS/CSD managers to effectively reduce the average caseloads. The causes of turnover, as reported to HR, are understood and apparently typical for this type of work. Nothing unusual is evidenced in the data provided.

Performance problems appear to be effectively managed through “pre-disciplinary” actions, such as performance improvement plans. The data showed only one termination related to performance during the period, but there was a large number of “probationary releases.” According to HR the primary reasons were policy violations, interpersonal conflicts, conduct and attendance.

Recruiting statistics reflect a range of 75 to 85 days for the length of time to fill the department’s open positions, which is typical for most County jobs, according to HR. The introduction of a “rolling core induction” process, as described by the head of recruitment, should help in developing new SSPs on a continual basis.

In the opinion of the Grand Jury, the Riverside County Human Resources team we interviewed reflects a positive business partner relationship with DPSS/CSD management in “addressing personnel issues in a timely manner,” as prescribed by the 2019 external report. They appear to maintain a proactive stance to support CPS’s growing challenges.

Following are some of the recruitment and retention strategies implemented by DPSS/CSD management for the SSP III. This classification is responsible for complex and sophisticated tasks, including investigations, adoption assessments, continuing services, and court-related functions.

- Hired additional entry-level SSPs (I/II) to help the SSP III with managing their workload by supporting parental/child visitations, arranging home visits, and providing transportation to parents and their children
- Increased the number of supervisors to decrease the staff to supervisory ratio and increase the time spent on coaching and employee development
- Collaborated with Human Resources, DPSS Staff Development, and the Academy for Professional Excellence through San Diego State University to support Continuous Staff Hiring, On-Boarding, and Induction Training for Mission Critical Work
- Partnered with the Academy for Professional Excellence at San Diego State University School of Social Work (Child Welfare Development Services) to provide coaching and promote retention of SSPs. Professional coaches’ team with SSPs and supervisors to help strengthen their child welfare practice skills and promote professional development

- Implemented Continuous Quality Improvement Processes to analyze and develop a more efficient means to reduce work task duplication and streamline social worker processes

### CASELOADS

Probably the most perplexing and challenging function faced by DPSS/CSD management, and the case-carrying SSPs, is driving down the ever-increasing caseloads. The numbers expressed by SSP III interviews varied from 38-40 per SSP, with 12-15 additional referrals on average, per month, every month.

This Grand Jury could not identify any state or federal statute prescribing specific caseload limits for CPS workers. According to DPSS/CSD management, there is “no legal statute or government code” in California that dictates the number of cases managed by a CPS social worker. However, there are several research studies on this subject, one of which is referenced below:

***“RESEARCH SUMMARY: CASELOAD STANDARDS and WEIGHTING METHODOLOGIES”*** published by the San Diego State University School of Social Work in 2019 refers to maximum caseload range of 13 to 24 cases per worker, which aligns with certain national standards. The Council on Accreditation (COA) recommends that caseloads not exceed 18 children per caseworker according to the study. Other studies report caseloads ranging from 10 to 110 children and an average of 24 to 31 per workers.<sup>17</sup>

According to interviews we conducted, the estimated “front end” (Investigative Services) workers carry approximately 18-20 cases, with 12 new referrals. The “back end” (Continuing Services) workers carry approximately 25-30 cases, with up to 40-45 referrals. In one region, the average caseload was reported to be approximately 37 (39 the highest).

According to CSD management, the average caseload for Investigative Services was 29 as of February 2022. Based on data provided to the Grand Jury, the number of cases each month fluctuate, showing a definite increase in last the 12 months.

The Central Intake Center (CIC) responds to all calls from the Riverside County child abuse hotline. In 2021, the total number of hotline calls was 63,475, or approximately 5,290 calls per month. Suspected child abuse referrals are received, evaluated, and processed in accordance with department protocols. In 2021, a total of 3,867 of those calls were “substantiated” through investigation as child abuse or neglect. Eighty percent of the calls are identified as “general neglect.” Data for 2022 (only January and February were provided) indicates the same level of activity.

In one region, according to the interviewees, it is felt that the ideal caseload would be around 30 per case-carrying SSP. In another region, a “goal of 25 would be ideal.” It was interesting to note how caseload numbers varied and were inconsistent between all interviews. What was a common perception, however, is that caseloads, which are already challenging, continue to increase. None of the SSPs, or managers, displayed any indication of dissatisfaction or disillusionment that CPS management was not taking necessary steps to address this workload problem.



An interesting observation, as reported by a few of the interviewees, is that calls into Central Intake “spike” during March, which is referred to as “March Madness.” A possible cause for the spike is the number of children returning from spring break and possible cases of abuse are noted by “mandated reporters”, such as teachers, school administrators, teacher’s aides, etc. Another spike occurs in October, a probable cause could not be clearly identified. Staff turnover was also cited as a contributing factor in the higher caseloads per SSP.

DPSS/CSD managers monitor caseloads on a weekly basis and redistribute workload and resources across the regions, especially for Investigative Services. The meetings are called “**Monday Work Group**” meetings. These weekly meetings include supervisors and managers of Intake, Investigative Services and Continuing Services to look at and determine the best approach to balance workloads.

Other strategies being employed by CPS to drive down the average caseloads of SSPs are:

- “Strike Teams” that are generally comprised of 14-16 people (SSP IIIs, two managers, two supervisors). Their goal is to address and resolve cases that are 45 days old or longer in phases. As a result of this plan, “aged-referrals have gone down.” Strike Teams will become a permanent operating unit and its members may be eligible for additional compensation, according to CSD management
- SSPs I and II can do “follow ups” after the SSP III has stabilized the case. They follow-up with continuing services providers
- A new policy, enacted in January 2022, is the “5-Day Referrals”, which is in addition to the “10-day Referral” program. The “5-day Referral” plan is to identify and act on “High Risk Referrals”, similar to the Immediate Referral (IR) actions, which are handled by the Command Post. The Command Post is staffed by a special team of SSP IIIs
- Addition of two “Sexual Abuse Units” for handling of those types of cases
- Partnering with Human Resources on recruitment and retention strategies as listed on pages 12 and 13 of this report

The managers we spoke with expressed confidence that these combined efforts are helping, but there is no doubt that the workloads will continue to be heavy.

Supervisor Kevin Jeffries, Riverside County Board of Supervisors, recently commented in March, 2022...

*“ CPS caseloads are at “bone-crushing levels,” .....” ...adding that state funding to care for vulnerable children and adults is “grossly inadequate” and available housing and treatment facilities “are significantly limited and at times nonexistent.”<sup>18</sup>*



## **FINDINGS**

In this section, the 2021-2022 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury outlines “findings”, or observations, derived from our in-person interviews with SSPs, Regional Managers, and Deputy Directors.

**F1: ROLES and RESPONSIBILITIES:** The Grand Jury found that roles and responsibilities have been clearly defined in accordance with the recommendation from the 2019 External Review Analysis and Process Improvement report. We also found that there is clear and consistent communication between supervisors and County Counsel. CPS and County Counsel are working together to provide the support and the tools they need for making timely decisions that will protect the children.

SSPs and managers reported that the working relationship with County Counsel has had the “biggest impact.” Executive management promotes a “Strict Structure” approach and a “line of sight” management philosophy, which includes supervisors meeting with their SSPs daily, and supervisors meeting with regional managers. As described in an interview, this is “more work, but better efficiency.”

**F2: WARRANT FOR REMOVAL PROCESS:** While the Probable Cause Statements may seem “cumbersome, tedious and time consuming”, according to only a few of SSPs interviewed, most reported that they feel comfortable with the process, especially with help from County Counsel. Policies and procedures for both daytime and afterhours processing were current as of 2020 and 2021, respectively. Several of those interviewed felt that the requirement to clearly articulate “preventable services to maintain the family unit”, and having “dedicated law enforcement specifically working with CPS”, have enhanced the process. The procedures for obtaining warrants, as written, specifically outline the roles and responsibilities of the SSPs, supervisors, and County Counsel. We found that current procedures for obtaining a warrant from the court for removal are working well.

**F3: STAFFING PROCEDURES:** This is a critical step in the process of investigating and determining what interventions may be required by the circumstances. The SSPs know they are required to keep their supervisors informed throughout the investigation and how decisions are made to “promote” or to close an investigation. This is termed “staffing a referral.” The SSP is responsible for documenting the conversations, explaining the directives given, and the rationale for the decisions. The documentation is recorded into the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS).

The Grand Jury did not identify any significant process issues with the “staffing a referral” process.

**F4: THE REMOVAL PROCESS:** SSPs who have undertaken actions to remove a child from a home due to safety factors feel that better support and communication with their supervisors, and/or regional managers, has made these kinds of actions less daunting than before. While these actions may never be an easy task, they expressed some relief that it can be accomplished in a less stressful and more confident manner.

The most common issue described by the SSPs is in the timing of the removals. Delays in placement or availability invariably create issues with the timing for the removal, and in providing a safe environment for a child at a critical time. In accordance with one of the recommendations cited in the 2019 External Review Analysis and Process Improvement report, a “Specialized Placement” extended its service hours to accommodate placement needs. However, some of the SSPs felt that “the placement unit could work quicker.”

**F5: STRUCTURED DECISION MAKING (SDM)**<sup>®</sup>: Safety and risk assessments are the primary functions of this system:

- a) Safety: a child is likely to be in immediate danger of serious harm/maltreatment, which requires a protective intervention, and
- b) Risk: characteristics associated with a greater likelihood of future system involvement. Risk Assessment identifies families with “Low, Moderate, High, or Very High” probabilities of future abuse or neglect.

In our interviews with SSPs regarding this process, and the SDM tool, they reported they are comfortable with the tool, believe it is effective and have confidence in the guidance it provides. It is the Grand Jury’s opinion that no further “re-education” on the SDM is needed, but periodic refresher course should be required.

**F6: CASELOAD MANAGEMENT**: The average caseloads, as reported by the SSPs we interviewed, were inconsistent throughout the interviews. What was consistent is that the number of cases a SSP is normally carrying is felt to be a too high, especially with the additional referrals assigned.

As noted earlier in this report, a Riverside County Board supervisor recognizes the “bone-crushing” caseloads on CPS.

The current strategies (Strike teams, Monday Workgroup meetings, “5-Day Referral” actions, etc.) are encouraging to the SSPs and may in the long run help to reduce, or at least contain their caseload at manageable levels.

The Grand Jury agrees with DPSS/CSD management that an increase in the number of additional positions in Investigative Services and Continuing Services would have a significant impact on the reduction of caseload numbers per SSP.

**F7: TURNOVER RATE**: The current average turnover rate of 32% makes it additionally challenging for DPSS/CSD management to effectively reduce the average caseloads for SSPs.



## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

While we have only a few policy or practice recommendations, we hope that the overall observations and comments in this report will contribute in a constructive way. We believe that the appropriate stakeholders, some referred to in the analysis, are better equipped to evaluate and make necessary modifications to the policies and procedures that will protect children from abuse, neglect, or loss of life.

The 2021-2022 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury presents the following recommendations, which we trust will be positively received and considered:

**R1:** County Counsel to continue to support, guide and to stay actively involved with ongoing training of SSPs, such as the monthly “Brown Bag” meetings. Continue monitoring court processes and law enforcement engagement with CPS.

Based on Finding 1  
Financial Impact: None

**R2:** DPSS/CSD management to ensure all SSPs, not only those that are case carrying, are familiarized and educated with the process of writing/completing a Probable Cause Statement. Implementation to be completed by end of fiscal year 2022-2023.

Based on Finding 2  
Financial Impact: No incremental cost

**R3:** DPSS/CSD to evaluate the expansion of placement unit locations for children removed from the home due to safety factors. This would greatly assist SSPs in timely removals and provide a child a safe environment at a critical time. Implementation to be completed by end of fiscal year 2022-2023.

Based on Finding 4  
Financials Impact: Moderate to Significant dependent upon additional facilities

**R4:** Human Resources to develop a plan to address and reduce SSP voluntary turnover and number of losses during the probationary period in order to significantly reduce overall turnover. Plan should include recommendations related to compensation, health care packages and career development, as well as other retention strategies. Plan to be submitted to the Executive Office not later than December 31, 2022.

Based on Finding 7  
Financial Impact: Moderate to Significant

**R5:** Board of Supervisors create an Ad Hoc committee to study and propose an action plan for CPS staffing levels in order to drive down the average caseloads, including approval of additional approved positions for Investigative Services and Continuing Services for fiscal year 2023-2024 as follows:

- a) Investigative Services SSP III: 70-75 new positions
- b) Continuing Services SSP I and II: 20-25 new positions

Based on Finding 6  
Financial Impact: Approximately \$7M annually, including cost of benefits

**R6:** DPSS/CSD to prepare a summary report on caseload management that illustrates how the actions they have taken have been successful or not. This summary report is to be submitted to the Executive Office not later than June 30, 2024.

Based on Finding 6  
Financial Impact: No incremental cost

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## EPILOGUE

The topic of Child Abuse and Neglect is multifaceted and cannot be adequately studied in a relatively short period of time. And a thorough, judicious analysis of the seemingly enormous service performed by this agency cannot be distilled into one brief report.

Preventing child abuse and neglect was not specifically discussed in the SSP interviews as it would have required an extensive amount of time. However, this Grand Jury report would be remiss if it did not reflect on the importance of CPS's role in protecting children from abuse and neglect, children who are suffering physical, psychological and emotional damage. It is their mission.

Throughout our investigation, we were pleased with the level of cooperation and assistance from DPSS management, Child Services Division management, and particularly the Social Services Practitioners we met with. We trust that this report adequately expresses our appreciation for the work they do.

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## REQUIRED RESPONSES

The following responses are required pursuant to Penal Code §933 and §933.05:

- Assistant CEO, Riverside County Human Services and Director, Department of Public Social Services (DPSS): F1 – F7; R1 – R7
- Assistant Director, Riverside County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS), Children's Services Division: F1- F7; R1 – R7
- Assistant CEO/Director of Human Resources Riverside County Human Resources Director: F7; R4
- Riverside County Office of County Counsel: F1; R1
- Riverside County Board of Supervisors: R5

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## GLOSSARY

- **Abuse:** intentionally or recklessly causing or attempting to cause bodily injury or causing reasonable apprehension of imminent serious bodily injury to himself, herself, or another.
- **Alert Development and Approval:** an Alert is the CSD method of providing policy directives quickly to staff which requires immediate implementation. The trigger for an Alert can be the receipt of an All County Letter or similar document from the California Department of Social Services, a directive from DPSS or CSD administration, etc.
- **Caseload:** The number of cases (children or families) assigned to an individual worker in a given time period. Caseload reflects a ratio of cases (or clients) to staff members and

may be measured for an individual worker, all workers assigned to a specific type of case, or all workers in a specified area (e.g., agency or region).

- **Child:** a person under the age of 18 years.
- **Child abuse or neglect includes:** sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and other physical or emotional abuse, severe or general neglect of the child's needs (food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and willful cruelty or unjustifiable punishment of a child).
- **Collateral Contacts:** Collateral contacts are made with an individual identified in the investigation that has information relevant to the completion of the investigation and its findings (example: babysitters, medical staff, law enforcement officers, family members, etc.)
- **Command Post:** Due to the emergent nature of the referrals, it is mandatory for Command Post social workers to document all activities within 24 hours. All consultations, directives, and investigative activities must be entered into Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) before rolling over any referral to an operational region for further investigation.
- **Confidentiality:** The identity of persons filing reports is confidential, but may be made known to appropriate licensing, law enforcement, and protective service agencies.
- **Fourth Amendment (annotated):** The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.
- **Fourteenth Amendment (annotated):** All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.
- **General Neglect:** failure of a parent/guardian to provide care and protection necessary for a child's mental and physical development. This would include, but is not limited to, unsanitary conditions, lack of food, clean water, or household utilities, controlled substance abuse, inadequate supervision.
- **Global Assessment:** A comprehensive evaluation of information collected through assessments such as the SDM Safety and Risk tools, family function and criminal history available through public records. This inclusive assessment addresses the broader needs of a child and family which impact a child's safety, permanency and well-being. The Global Assessment looks at the big picture and not just a set of symptoms.
- **Probable Cause Statement:** Probable Cause Statement is an affidavit, prepared by the SSP, under penalty of perjury, submitted to the court as evidence supporting the issuance of a protective custody warrant.
- **Referral History Alert:** Referral History Alerts highlight concerns of a family's prior involvement with CSD. A family's prior child welfare history gives insight into a family's dynamics, elevated safety and risk factors, and prior interventions and services offered. It allows the Investigative Services (IS) social worker to effectively prepare for their investigation.

- **Referral Information:** the Intake Specialist receives reports of alleged abuse, neglect and/or exploitation at the Central Intake Center (CIC). The allegations are documented on the Emergency Response Referral Information document.
- **Removal Warrants:** A child cannot be removed from parental custody without parental consent, exigent circumstances, or a warrant issued by a court.
- **Structured Decision Making:** Children’s Services Division (CSD) utilizes the Structured Decision Making® (SDM) model in making critical assessments and decisions regarding the ongoing safety and well-being of children. This project was initiated in 1998 by The California Department of Social Services, contracting with the Children’s Research Center.



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  - SSP II: First professional level classification in SSP series. Emphasis is on learning casework methods, procedures and policies, carrying of a limited, non-complex caseload under close supervision.
  - SSP III: Advanced level classification of the professionally trained social caseworker. Incumbents are responsible for performing full scope social service casework requiring difficult diagnosis and intensive treatment services.
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- California’s Most Vulnerable Parents: When Maltreated Children ...

~

## **DISCLAIMER**

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

One Grand Jury member was recused during the investigation and preparation of this report.

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July 7, 2022

The Honorable Board of Supervisors  
County of Riverside  
4080 Lemon Street  
Riverside, California 92501

Dear Supervisors,

On June 24, 2022, Larson LLP published its Report entitled "Riverside County Programs and Services for Children in Foster Care, Transitioning Youth, and Adults Under Conservatorship – Assessment and Recommendations" (the "Report").

In our Report, we explained that on June 24, 2019, the Riverside County Probate Court established Special Needs Trusts for each of the 13 Turpin siblings. These Trusts were funded through donations made to the RUHS Foundation to help support the Turpin siblings. The Office of Public Guardian was appointed Trustee of the Special Needs Trusts for the seven adult Turpin siblings who were under conservatorship, and Part 3 of our Report contains our analysis regarding their trust accounts.

At the time we published our Report, we had not yet received access to the court records pertaining to the Special Needs Trusts for the six Turpin siblings who were not under conservatorship (the "Trusts"). We recently received access to these files and thus provide the following supplement to our Report.

**1. Pertinent Trust Terms**

Dennis Sandoval, a private attorney, was appointed the Trustee for each of the Trusts. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

In performing its duties, the Trustee must exercise discretion in a reasonable manner and it must act in accordance with fiduciary principles which includes refraining from acting in bad faith or in disregard of the purposes of the trust.<sup>5</sup>

[REDACTED]

**2. Overview of the Trusts' Accountings**

[REDACTED] the Court required Mr. Sandoval to file his first annual accounting on August 24, 2020. Mr. Sandoval failed to file an accounting by this deadline. On August 27, 2020, the Court issued a Notice of Accounting Past Due.

---

[REDACTED]

<sup>5</sup> Cal. Prob. Code §§ 16080-81.

[REDACTED]

On September 22, 2020, Mr. Sandoval filed reports and accountings for each of the Trusts for the period of June 24, 2019 to July 31, 2020. Figure 36 shows the assets and disbursements for the Trusts that were reflected in these filings.

**Figure 36: Overview of the Trusts**

ACCOUNT	TURPIN 8	TURPIN 9	TURPIN 10	TURPIN 11	TURPIN 12	TURPIN 13
TOTAL ASSETS	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
TOTAL DISBURSEMENTS	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
NET	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

Each of the accountings sought disbursements of approximately \$330 for Mr. Sandoval's services and related legal fees. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the Court [REDACTED] ordered that Mr. Sandoval file the next accountings on September 30, 2022.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Mr. Sandoval requested that the Court allow him to distribute \$15,000 of the Trusts' assets to ABLE accounts for the beneficiaries [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Mr. Sandoval explained that this transfer would “allow for greater flexibility for how the assets can be spent in the future, and eventually eliminate the need for court supervision [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

ABLE accounts are tax-advantaged savings accounts for individuals with disabilities. Distributions from ABLE accounts are tax-free if used for qualified disability expenses.<sup>7</sup> These qualified disability expenses include “education, housing, transportation, employment training and support, assistive technology and personal support services, health, prevention and wellness, financial management and administrative services, legal fees, expenses for oversight and monitoring, [and] funeral and burial expenses....”<sup>8</sup> SSI and Medicaid benefits are unaffected by the first \$100,000 that is deposited in an ABLE Account.<sup>9</sup> Generally, contributions to an ABLE account may not exceed the annual gift tax exemption (\$15,000 in 2021).<sup>10</sup>

On November 25, 2020, the Court ordered that Mr. Sandoval submit a proposal for who should serve as the custodian of the ABLE accounts. On February 16, 2021, Mr. Sandoval filed a declaration in response to this order. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.irs.gov/government-entities/federal-state-local-governments/able-accounts-tax-benefit-for-people-with-disabilities>.

<sup>8</sup> 26 U.S.C. § 529A(e)(5).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/spotlights/spot-able.html>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/spotlights/spot-able.html>.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

**4. Analysis**

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

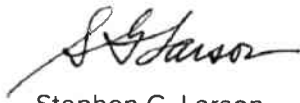
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

We look forward to discussing this Supplement to our Report with the Board of Supervisors at its earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Stephen G. Larson



Hilary Potashner

Riverside County Programs and  
Services for Children in Foster  
Care, Transitioning Youth, and  
Adults Under Conservatorship

Assessment & Recommendations

**REDACTED PURSUANT TO PROTECTIVE ORDERS**

June 2022

**LARSON**

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7.12.2022 3.36



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June 24, 2022

The Honorable Board of Supervisors  
County of Riverside  
4080 Lemon Street  
Riverside, California 92501

Dear Supervisors,

In January 2018, the Nation learned that the 13 children of David and Louise Turpin had escaped captivity from a Perris home where they had been neglected, starved, and tortured by their parents. In the days that followed, Riverside County activated and deployed extensive services for the Turpin siblings—including law enforcement, social workers, medical professionals, teachers, therapists, foster parents, guardians, attorneys, and more. For the nearly four years that followed, the Turpin siblings continued to receive social services from Riverside County.

In October 2021, on behalf of the Board of Supervisors, Riverside County Executive Officer Jeffrey Van Wagenen retained and commissioned Larson LLP to assess the County's care of the Turpins, and more broadly, the services provided by the County to all children in foster care, transitioning youth, and adults under conservatorship.

Our first step in conducting this assessment was to vet and assemble a team of subject matter experts, including professors from UC Berkeley's School of Public Policy and School of Social Welfare, the UCLA School of Public Affairs, and Virginia Tech's Center for Gerontology. With our team in place, we began with a review of existing reports, court filings, and other germane documentation. We received the cooperation of the County Executive Office, County Counsel, Department of Public Social Services, Riverside University Health System - Behavioral Health, and the Office of Public Guardian, enabling us to review and analyze approximately 30,000 pages of records and pertinent documents.

In addition, we interviewed more than 100 individuals, including County personnel, stakeholders from partner agencies, and a subset of social services recipients as well as family members. We

also surveyed almost 300 staff members to obtain their feedback on the quality and availability of services as well as on workforce issues. The experiences and perspectives of County personnel and other stakeholders were essential to our understanding and assessment of how well these systems work to provide services to children and adults in need.

With respect to the Turpin siblings, we conclude there were many times over the last four years that they received the care they needed from the County. This was not always the case, however, and all too often the social services system failed them. Some of the younger Turpin children were placed with caregivers who were later charged with child abuse. Some of the older siblings experienced periods of housing instability and food insecurity as they transitioned to independence. Some of the Turpin siblings found it too difficult to access the funds intended for their use. Many were caught in the middle of confusing and complicated legal proceedings. When they complained about their circumstances, they often felt frustrated, unheard, and stifled by the system.

More generally, our systems-level analysis revealed other problems. For example, many Riverside County personnel, though personally and professionally committed to their work, struggle to fill gaps left by staffing vacancies and turnover. High caseloads stand in the way of consistently providing high-quality services and ensuring the safety and care for our most vulnerable populations. Many services and programs are underfunded and stretched far too thin. Coordination and communication across the departments must improve. The resources already available to the public must be made more accessible to the County's clients. These shortcomings are exacerbated by too few suitable foster care homes and a lack of affordable housing in the County. In short, while there are many examples of dedicated Riverside County personnel succeeding despite the systemic obstacles in their way, there are too many other examples of falling short or even failing outright.

In our report, we have made practical and actionable recommendations to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and adults under the supervision and care of Riverside County through a combination of policy, practice, and procedural changes. These recommendations strive to take into account the many policy constraints impacting the County and the reality that so many clients come to services from places of instability and trauma. As such, we believe our recommendations are achievable and, if implemented, will promote excellence in practice.

While several members of our firm have supported our investigation, the undersigned would like to particularly recognize Andrew Bedigian and Jonathan Gershon for their many contributions to this project.

LARSON

Larson LLP  
larsonllp.com

We appreciate the County of Riverside entrusting Larson LLP to conduct this vital assessment. We look forward to discussing our findings and recommendations with the Board of Supervisors at its earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Stephen G. Larson



Hilary Potashner

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# Executive Summary

## Part 1: Programmatic Reviews

### Children's Services Division

The Children's Services Division handles child welfare services for the County, including investigating child abuse and neglect allegations and operating programs to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of vulnerable children. The Division contracts for services with non-profit providers called Foster Family Agencies and collaborates with other county agencies and divisions to prevent and respond to child maltreatment. The Children's Services Division provides out-of-home care for children and youth in need of protection. It relies heavily on partnership with 68 Foster Family Agencies for placement and service provision. These agencies are responsible for all non-kin out-of-home placements, which constitute almost one-third (31.4%) of all children in out-of-home care.

#### Workforce

**High staff turnover and vacancy rates at the Children's Services Division have reached a crisis point and are adversely impacting staff and service delivery.** Social workers ensure the safety and success of children and families on a day-to-day basis. While not unique to Riverside County, the Division's high staff turnover and vacancy rates directly impact service delivery and quality. The Division's vacancy rate is approximately 40 percent, with an attrition rate of more than 30 percent for some of its most critical positions. This leaves remaining staff with less time to engage with families or to make careful, well-informed decisions. The additive impact of high vacancy and attrition rates hurts all aspects of service delivery and quality of care for highly vulnerable populations.

Inadequate compensation, overwhelming caseloads, and, insufficient support, particularly for new staff, are key drivers of the Division's high turnover rate. Average caseloads are more than twice California's minimum standards for child welfare social workers. The result is high levels of stress and burnout. Interviews with Division leadership show commitment to improving working conditions for staff and reducing the Division's turnover and vacancy rates. Success in this regard will require dedicated training and funding at all levels to transform the Division into a workplace in which staff are adequately compensated and feel supported and motivated to stay.

The Children's Services Division has taken steps to increase job satisfaction and reduce staff workload, including a recent 5.5 percent pay increase for social workers and supervisors, additional hiring for key positions, and a newly implemented continuous quality improvement process. While many supervisors provide strong support for staff, high rates of new and less

experienced staff require increased supervision and guidance, which has been especially challenging in the remote work environment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This places an increased burden on both supervisors and existing staff.

Staff at the Children's Services Division are deeply committed to the children and families they serve and are passionate about social work, which motivates many to stay in their positions despite the challenges. However, few of our other recommendations pertaining to the Division improvement can be implemented without adequate staff. Sufficient staff is foundational to all other Division activity and quality improvement efforts.

## Placements

**Riverside County urgently needs more quality foster homes.** Respondents raised concerns about the trauma children experience due to insufficient and inadequate placements, poor quality care, and frequent placement changes. Respondents reported that some children are out of school for long periods of time, rarely visit with siblings or birth parents, and have limited access to services. The need to increase the quantity and quality of foster parents warrants a county-wide initiative with engagement from multiple stakeholders.

**The placement shortage for children with complex needs is acute.** The County is designing and piloting models of care to meet these needs, but these options are urgently needed at scale. To minimize children sleeping in offices while awaiting placements, an Airbnb with 24-hour staffing accommodates some waiting children. **A center for short-term, transitional stays is urgently needed to accommodate children awaiting placement.**

**The Children's Services Division should require more effective training for foster parents (also known as resource parents) and provide better ongoing support.** The demands placed on resource parents are significant. The circumstances attendant to children's separation from their parents, the court and child welfare agency's involvement with their family, and the unique behavioral and emotional challenges posed by children who have experienced trauma create an exceptionally demanding care environment, referred to by some as parenting plus. Many resource parents lack the skills to handle challenging behaviors, which leads to requests that children be moved to another placement.

Given the crucial role of Foster Family Agencies in providing almost one-third of the County's foster care placements, **Children's Services Division's oversight and monitoring of Foster Family Agencies is a critical area in need of improvement.** We recommend this guiding principle for Division staff working closely with Foster Family Agencies: **trust, but verify.** The Division needs to be able to trust their Foster Family Agencies, but they also need to verify the quality of their work. We heard concerns from Division staff about the quality of placements these agencies provided as well as confusing decision-making about placement moves. Some respondents described incidents wherein Foster Family Agency staff

made decisions that were not in the best interests of the children they served. Through every step of the process—from designing contracts to monitoring performance—the Division must be in the driver's seat.

Some Foster Family Agencies provide Short-term Residential Therapeutic Program treatment centers in addition to placements, foster care, and adoption services. According to Children's Services Division respondents, Foster Family Agencies too often "reject and eject" children who pose special challenges leading to a situation in which top Division leadership must spend an inordinate amount of time and resources trying to accommodate children and young people with complex needs.

To make the best use of existing placement options, **the Children's Services Division needs more efficient and effective tools for matching children with the right placement.** The process for identifying available and appropriate foster homes relies on emailing with the 68 Foster Family Agencies contracted to provide a variety of placement types. Foster care placement software such as [Binti](#) is used in dozens of jurisdictions for efficient matching and to streamline foster parent onboarding.<sup>1</sup> Riverside County has been exploring Binti and other similar technology solutions but has encountered funding challenges. Bringing all parties together to implement a placement software tool would support the common goal of quickly identifying and supporting safe and effective placements for children.

## Services for Families, Children, and Transition-Age Youth

**Many services to families, children, and youth are under-resourced and stretched too thin.** Wait times for services are long, some specialized programs have been paused or terminated, and many service providers are short-staffed. Riverside County is large and transportation to service locations is challenging for clients in remote areas.

County and community-based partners provide most of the needed services with Children's Services Division oversight. Division leadership appears determined to work creatively with community partners to improve the service landscape. We encountered highly dedicated, knowledgeable, and seasoned professionals who are concerned about children's physical and mental health and their educational needs, and who want to see access to services for parents and children improved.

Parents seeking reunification are offered community-based services to address the unsafe behaviors that led to the removal of their child. These parents often face difficulties such as substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues, poverty, and housing instability. Both federal and state law offer parents up to one year to participate in services to address these

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<sup>1</sup> Binti, "Foster Care Software," Accessed June 9, 2022.

challenges, as specified in their case plan. Accordingly, reunification hinges on timely access to high-quality services.

**Our findings indicate that services for parents often have long wait lists, virtual services are lower quality than in-person services, minimal services are available in remote communities, and services are often far from parents' homes.**

**Mental health services for young people are inadequate.** Problems included too few therapists, inexperienced therapists, and discontinuity in therapeutic care leading young people to opt out. Reasons for discontinuity included therapists leaving their jobs, children moving to different counties, and changes of insurance providers due to age or geographic moves.

**Transportation is a barrier for clients accessing services, particularly for those in remote locations.** In addition, caregivers sometimes struggle to find time to take children to all their appointments, especially foster parents caring for multiple children.

**Additional services are needed for teens and young adults who will not be reunited with their parents to prepare them for independence.** These young people must master an array of skills—from managing money to forming healthy relationships. They also need assistance accessing health care, education, housing, and other supports such as CalFresh. Many respondents emphasized the need for hands-on service connection, not just referrals to services. Others called for teen-friendly communication tools, such as a better Children's Services Division social media presence to alert young people to opportunities, deadlines, and resources.

Vital documentation, such as birth certificates, social security cards, and California IDs, is a critical need for young people moving to independence. We encountered concerns that **young people and resource parents are not receiving adequate support to obtain these vital documents.** We suggest that the Division track obtainment rates so performance in this area is better understood. This reform is necessary. Once identification documents are given to young people, many lose them during periods of homelessness or placement disruptions. Replacing these documents requires navigating a maze of bureaucratic entities, and not having them creates obstacles to obtaining employment, housing, and education.

## **Court-Related Children's Services Division Services**

Social workers' presence in court has been limited since the pandemic began. If questions are raised that the counsel cannot answer, social workers are contacted by phone. Some respondents saw this change positively (e.g., social workers' time is better spent in the field). Others felt that social workers should be present to share important details of the case and to connect in person with concerned parties. Their presence may be especially helpful for



challenging or controversial cases. Respondents raised concerns that, too often, court reports are inaccurate or missing, causing delays and impacting child safety.

## Key Recommendations Regarding Children's Services Division

We recommend that Riverside County and the Department of Public Social Services leadership take the actions listed below. Additional recommendations are provided in the body of the full report.

### Workforce

Increase salaries to ensure parity with surrounding counties and Riverside's true cost of living.  
Provide annual cost of living adjustments for all staff.

1. Set caseload limits for all units based on California's legislative standards.
2. Expand the Department of Public Social Services' existing Employee Assistance Program to include peer counseling, mentoring, and an office dedicated to employee health and wellness. Staff comments suggest the current Employee Assistance Program should be made more effective, accessible, and responsive to staff needs for health and wellness.
3. Define core competencies across positions to guide the hiring process to ensure qualified hires and training that better prepares staff for the realities of the work.
4. Resume in-person Induction and increase field training for new social workers.
5. Streamline the onboarding process for new hires.
6. Develop leadership positions without case-carrying responsibilities to effectively manage key initiatives such as oversight of Foster Family Agencies and the implementation of critical aspects of California's Core Practice Model and the Quality Parenting Initiative.

### Placements

1. Increase County oversight of Foster Family Agencies through data monitoring, collaborative critical incident review, audits, and the creation of a new ombudsperson position.
2. Launch a county-wide effort to increase the number of high-quality foster homes for children whose parents and relatives are unable to care for them. Partnerships with Foster Family Agencies, County agency partners, community-based agencies, the faith community, schools, and the media will be required.
3. Create a family-finding unit dedicated to finding kin placements when children are initially removed.
4. Utilize Child and Family Team Meetings within 48 hours of a home removal to support rapid identification of kin placements and mandate that family-finding staff participate in these meetings.

5. Develop targeted, intensive efforts to improve the quality of care provided by resource parents. Efforts should include robust [Quality Parenting Initiative](#) implementation,<sup>2</sup> wraparound services, evidence-based parent training opportunities (e.g., KEEP—an evidence-based support and skill enhancement program for foster and kinship parents of children) and parent support groups.
6. Develop a receiving center for short-term transitional stays for children awaiting placement. Receiving centers give placement workers time to identify kin placements as well as to identify placements that best meet the needs of children. On-site mental health services and pediatrician assessment offices could help meet multiple needs at a single point of entry.
7. Assess the newly developed professional parent model, the Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program (STRTP-of-one), to determine rapid scalability. This new model recruits caregivers from human service professionals and provides them salaries commensurate with the demands of the placements. Wraparound, in-home supports are included.
8. Create incentives for Foster Family Agencies to develop unconditional care policies.

#### Services for Children and Families

1. Create a plan to improve screening, referral, and enrollment systems under the Integrated Health and Human Services Delivery System effort, to ensure that all clients—and particularly birth parents and transition-age youth—are systematically connected to the full suite of services they are eligible to receive.
2. Identify missing or inadequate services and develop contracts for them. In particular, identify opportunities for expanded access to transportation for clients in remote areas. Provide access to rideshare or other private transportation resources.
3. Establish a funded County Youth Commission to recommend improvements for serving this population. Establish senior-level accountability for this working group.
4. Verify that identification documents have been obtained by requiring digital images of the vital documents be included in Court Reports and case documentation. Track performance of document obtainment. Provide young adults with tools such as [iFoster's digital locker](#) to retain their vital documents.<sup>3</sup>
5. Develop and use teen-friendly communication tools such as social media platforms to share information about services and programs. Develop a Teens and Young Adults web site with comprehensive resources and application links. Use email, text, and direct messaging for communications between the Division and youth.

<sup>2</sup> Quality Parenting Initiative, "QPI – Quality Parenting Initiative," Accessed June 6, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> iFoster, "iFoster Tay Assistant," Accessed June 9, 2022.

## Court-Related Children's Services Division Services

1. Selectively resume in-person court activities for social workers, prioritizing challenging or controversial cases.
2. Expand partnership with the Court Appointed Special Advocate program to increase the number of children assigned a Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteer.
3. Create courtroom and attorney-level access to the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System with the development of the new Child Welfare Services Case Management System, Child Welfare Services - California Automated Response and Engagement System. Create a user category with the ability to view Child Placement, Service Plans, Notice, and Paternity, at a minimum.

The Children's Services Division needs a dedicated unit to implement the strategically-driven initiatives recommended in this report, and beyond. To this end, we recommend that the Division create a Strategic Initiatives Unit with a management or director-level position and personnel, without case-carrying responsibilities. The unit would implement initiatives such as Intensive Foster Care, Comprehensive Prevention/Family First Prevention Services Act, and critical elements of California's Core Practice Model including the Quality Parenting Initiative and KEEP. Core functions of the unit could include governance, infrastructure development, communications, service design, testing, and Continuous Quality Improvement for strategic initiatives. This shift would then free up the Contracts Unit to manage and audit contracts that are part of implementing the initiatives rather than managing the initiatives themselves.

## Office of Public Guardian

Through conservatorships, the Office of Public Guardian serves between 1,200 and 1,300 vulnerable adults by managing their affairs and making vital decisions about their lives. Depending on the type of conservatorship, clients may be experiencing neglect or financial exploitation, cycles of crisis and medication for severe mental illness, and an acute need for housing and health care. By researching court cases, conducting an in-depth survey, and interviewing stakeholders, we assessed how well the Office of Public Guardian assists its clients in securing access to their rights, benefits, and entitlements.

Despite low staffing and an inadequate budget, Office of Public Guardian staff use flexibility and creativity to build care plans that aim to align with client wishes. **However, extremely high and complex caseloads, limited funding, and a lack of oversight put clients at risk of having their needs go unmet and their rights unprotected.**

**Riverside County should seek ways to expand and leverage funding to reduce caseloads and improve service delivery.** The Office of Public Guardian should establish basic oversight safeguards and a process to protect client rights and address concerns. Staff

carry exceedingly high caseloads, ranging from 98–113 cases per person—about 3.5 times the recommended standard of 30 cases per person.

The Office of Public Guardian is underfunded. Available County dollars have remained flat for the past five years, despite rising costs and inflation, and there has been no significant investment of state or federal funds. Demands on the Office will continue to increase as the County's population grows and the numbers of vulnerable adults and adults with disabilities rise.

Additional areas in need of improvement include:

- Probate restoration of rights is nearly non-existent.
- No transitional services are provided to adults whose rights have been restored.
- Office staff visit clients once every 90 days—which, while meeting minimum legal requirements, is an insufficient frequency to build trust and rapport.
- Only fourteen percent of clients live in their own homes. Others are in assisted living, board and care, nursing homes, and mental health facilities.
- The Office of Public Guardian lacks important mechanisms for public oversight and redress, such as conservatorship-specific clients rights policies and procedures, an advisory board, a publicly available annual report, and independent performance reviews.

While Public Guardian staff work hard to serve their clients, the Office of the Public Guardian severely lacks funding, staff, mechanisms to provide staff safety and support, adequate access to community-based housing solutions, and public oversight to provide accountability and preserve client rights. Our recommendations—with practical advice for implementation detailed in the full report—provide a realistic road map for addressing these insufficiencies.

## Key Recommendations Regarding the Office of Public Guardian

1. Allocate funds for the probate section of the Office of Public Guardian to increase the number of deputy public guardians so that the recommended caseload of 1:30 is achieved as soon as is feasible.
2. Increase support for deputy public guardians in the areas of safety, training, administrative support, and workplace flexibility.
3. Improve collaboration with other agencies as part of the County's Integrated Health and Human Services Delivery System initiative.
4. Implement a systemic means of external review, public information, and outreach.
5. Strengthen client voices in decision-making through model staff practices and training, increasing the frequency of visits, attention to restoration of rights, and ensuring adequate access to legal counsel.

6. Develop a plain-language, readily accessible client satisfaction survey and have the survey administered annually by an unbiased outside entity.
7. Place clients in secure, high-quality residential settings, prioritizing community-based options.

## Appointment of Counsel

Legal representation ensures that clients are afforded due process protections and that their rights are safeguarded. It ensures that clients have an advocate on their side, asserting their stated needs and requests in an effective manner. Accordingly, there are numerous California statutes mandating that the court appoint counsel in juvenile dependency cases and which permit, and sometimes require, that the court appoint counsel in guardianship and conservatorship proceedings.

To comply with these statutes, the Riverside County Superior Court contracts with attorneys to provide legal services to children and parents in juvenile dependency proceedings, and the Riverside Board of Supervisors contracts with an experienced law firm to provide legal services in guardianship and conservatorship proceedings.

**Studies into appointed counsel in juvenile dependency cases have established that reductions in court-appointed attorneys' caseloads and increases in their compensation result in significant improvements in case outcomes for their clients.** Similarly, with respect to appointed counsel in probate proceedings, adjusting compensation to more accurately reflect the breadth of services rendered will support the provision of necessary legal services, especially as caseloads increase, as they are expected to in the forthcoming years. Accordingly, as an overarching matter, the feasibility of transitioning to an hourly compensation model should be considered by the County in consultation with experienced appointed counsel as a mechanism to support high quality legal work as the system is further burdened.

## Key Recommendations Regarding Appointment of Counsel

1. Remove confusion regarding how appointed counsel in juvenile proceedings are compensated by revising appointed counsel's contracts to allow appointed counsel to invoice for the actual number of case appointments each month.
2. Impose a caseload limitation for counsel in juvenile proceedings that does not exceed the 141/188 threshold established by the Judicial Council of California.
3. Commission a study regarding caseload limits for counsel providing representation in probate cases, as scholarship on caseload limits for appointed counsel in probate proceedings is less developed and studied compared to juvenile dependency appointments.

4. Pay the Designated Firm in probate proceedings on an hourly basis for work performed on “extraordinary” cases.
5. Conduct a study to ensure that the current flat-fee rates for counsel appointed in juvenile dependency and probate proceedings are “adequate for the attorneys’ practice, accounting for overhead and other costs borne by private professionals.”<sup>4</sup>
6. Implement a feedback mechanism that captures client voices so that necessary improvements to appointed counsel’s representation of their clients can be promptly implemented.
7. Draft an informational document for the public that summarizes the various roles and responsibilities of the professionals involved in guardianships and conservatorships.

## Self-Sufficiency Programs

Riverside County residents in unstable circumstances—including clients of the Children’s Services Division and the Office of Public Guardian—need services that support their efforts to establish economic stability. The Department of Public Social Services administers a variety of programs to help low-income County residents meet their basic needs. Our inquiry examined access to public benefits relating to food assistance, housing, publicly provided health insurance, and cash assistance. We also reviewed how the Department works across programs and with other partners to deliver these services.

The Self-Sufficiency Programs are engaged in a variety of efforts to enable collaboration across programs and to leverage state funds for investment in local resources and initiatives. The Department has made it easier for people to enroll in key benefits programs by co-locating eligibility workers for Medi-Cal, CalFresh, and CalWorks at some clinics and in mobile outreach teams. The Linkages Program—a collaboration between the Children’s Services Division and Department of Public Social Services to provide intensive case management to select mutual clients—has recently established cross-programmatic relationships, data-sharing agreements, and increased capacity.

The Department of Public Social Services has a critical opportunity to participate in the Riverside County Board of Supervisors’ initiative to develop an integrated and comprehensive health and human services system, which will take a whole-person care approach and coordinate efforts across the County. The Department has also begun collaborating with the California Department of Social Services to revamp the agency’s business processes. The effort could standardize procedures and work processes to speed up response times and track more data.

Despite these efforts, true service integration remains elusive. In Riverside County in October 2021, only 25 percent of Medi-Cal participants were also enrolled in CalFresh,

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<sup>4</sup> Family Justice Initiative, *Attributes of High-Quality Legal Representation for Children and Parents in Child Welfare Proceedings* (2018).

compared to **30 percent statewide**. People applying for benefits are too often denied for procedural reasons, even when they may be eligible. **As many as 45 percent of CalFresh applications in Riverside County in recent years were denied for procedural reasons, about twice the rate in similar counties.** Our review showed that a lack of timely notices and responses from the County were a key cause.

Housing is a particular area of concern, as most housing programs are outside the purview of the Department of Public Social Services, and availability is extremely limited. There is no clear, agency-wide process for County staff to connect people with a wider set of comprehensive services.

Further concerns include the following:

- **Medi-Cal services are difficult to access.** Finding a geographically accessible health care provider that accepts Medi-Cal challenging for many clients.
- **Cross-program data sharing is limited, creating barriers to service access.** Stronger data-sharing agreements would allow for better joint planning between departments and for targeted outreach.
- **Benefits enrollment is difficult for clients.** Applications require navigating labyrinthian processes and do not take a trauma-informed approach.

While the Department of Public Social Services has already begun to initiate some integration of services and better outreach to clients, taking a systems-level approach to reform will best serve the needs of both the Department and its clients. If the Department can **rethink and invest in human services from a client-centered, trauma-informed, and holistic point of view**, it can transform the experiences of County residents who seek support and increase their chances of getting the benefits and services they need.

## Key Recommendations Regarding Self-Sufficiency Programs

1. Leverage the county-wide Integrated Health and Human Services Delivery System effort to streamline data sharing between internal programs.
2. Create a plan to improve screening, referral, and enrollment systems to ensure that all clients are systematically connected to the full suite of services they are eligible to receive, regardless of whether those services are administered by the Department of Public Social Services or other entities.
3. Strengthen messaging to clients to ensure they can maximize the benefits from Self-Sufficiency Programs after they enroll.
4. Streamline enrollment experiences to ensure that more eligible clients—especially those experiencing high stress and instability—get approved for benefits. This should include dedicated eligibility specialists who can serve as liaisons between Adult Services Division,

Children's Services Division, Office of Public Guardian, and the Self-Sufficiency Programs, paired with streamlined interviewing and verification processes.

## Policy and Procedure Manuals

The Children's Services Division's, Office of Public Guardian's, and Adult Services Division's policy and procedure manuals (collectively, Policy Manuals) must provide, in concise and easily understandable terms, a description of the statutorily mandated standard of care that all Children's Services Division, Office of Public Guardian, and Adult Services Division staff must provide to each client under their care. Currently, the Policy Manuals are primarily keyed to technical administrative requirements (i.e., data entry) to the near exclusion of client-centered priorities, namely the delivery of prompt, high quality care.

Instead of being unapproachable treatises that discuss every responsibility, task, and process that staff will encounter during their employment, the **Policy Manuals should be easily understood, highly accessible, pertinent information delivery systems that can be modified to conform to the latest best practices** while continuing to account for the particular challenges that Riverside staff face.

Today's social workers operate through smartphones and tablets. Therefore, an app-based technology solution provides the perfect medium to house the Policy Manuals. The app can also contain multiple, in-the-field resources designed to ensure the effective delivery of care to children and conservatees.

Furthermore, **the Policy Manuals should be organized to mirror the Children's Services Division, Office of Public Guardian, and Adult Services Division staff workflow.** This organization will support effective social services delivery and ensure that the statutorily required standards of care are achieved, as the Policy Manuals themselves will serve as in the field training aids, providing supervisory guidance to staff wherever they may be.

Finally, **as currently drafted, the Policy Manuals are both over and under-inclusive.** The Policy Manuals contain hundreds of pages of administration-specific procedures, including data entry procedures for the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System, yet fail to highlight and prioritize client-centered responsibilities that are the core of Children's Services Division, Adult Services Division, and Office of Public Guardian staff duties. The Policy Manuals should summarize the key care provisions (see Appendix I-K) in the applicable statutes and regulations, and how staff should implement those care standards for children and conservatees under their care.



## Key Recommendations Regarding Policy and Procedure Manuals

1. Revise to streamline and balance administrative-focused procedures (i.e., data entry) with the client-centered statutes and regulations.
2. Reorganize according to workflow.
3. Develop iOS and Android-based apps that provide a mobile-friendly version of the Policy Manuals, as well as other "in the field" resources.

## Looking Forward

The Ad Hoc Committee on Inter-Departmental Systems Improvements for Protection of Vulnerable Children and Adults should be the central organizing entity for overseeing the implementation of the recommendations in this report. This Committee is charged with reviewing system changes to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and adults under the County's care.

To enact these recommendations, significant resources are needed to prioritize, plan, execute, evaluate, and iterate. Already stretched thin, current Riverside County staff will be unable to invest the necessary time in system integration and reform. Supervisors and front-line staff cannot absorb additional work under current conditions where attrition, vacancies, and workloads have reached unacceptable highs. Further, there are likely skills required that should be accessed from external sources. For these reasons, we recommend that the County create new leadership and project management positions charged with system integration and reform efforts. Unyielding commitment and financial backing from the Board of Supervisors is imperative for this systems-level change.

## Part 2: Turpin Children's Experience in the Child Welfare System

Part Two of our report contains a summary of findings and a detailed analysis of the care and services provided to the Turpin children after they were removed from their biological parents' home. This section is redacted in its entirety in the publicly available version of this report to comply with the Court's Protective Orders.

## Part 3: Turpin Adults' Experiences Under Conservatorship

Part Three of our report contains a summary of findings and a detailed analysis of the care and services provided to the adult Turpin siblings. As part of this aspect of our investigation, we

received documents and information that are subject to protective orders. As a result, our findings, which summarize or are derived from confidential information, are redacted from the publicly available version of this report. However, the Court also unsealed some court records that the Turpin siblings did not object to having disclosed to the public. Our analysis of these records remains unredacted from the publicly available version of this report.

## Key Findings From Unsealed Court Records

Our analysis of the unsealed court records reflects three key findings:

1. The Designated Firm was appointed as counsel for all seven of the Turpin adult children. The unsealed court records establish that the firm vigorously and effectively advocated for the Turpin siblings in court. The Designated Firm's commitment to providing full-service legal representation of the Turpin siblings is commendable. However, the unsealed records show that there were heated conflicts between appointed counsel, County Counsel (advocating for the Office of Public Guardian), and the Riverside County District Attorney (who was prosecuting the Turpin parents) over both the nature and scope of the Designated Firm's representation and about confidential meetings with the siblings.

Despite the Designated Firm rightly protecting its clients' constitutional rights and interests, the conflicting legal positions advanced by the Designated Firm, the District Attorney, and County Counsel caused prolonged acrimony and may have interfered with the development of trusting and confidential attorney-client relationships, especially given the Turpins' vulnerability and lack of experience with the legal system.

2. A review of the unsealed accountings that were filed reflect that the adults received Supplemental Security Income, which was deposited into the conservatorship estates. Additionally, approximately \$30,000 per person was transferred to the Special Needs Trusts for each of the siblings. Although we have not found that any of these funds were improperly spent, we are concerned that County Counsel filed every required accounting for both the conservatorship estates and the Special Needs Trusts late—often years past the due date. Timely filing of accountings is a key component of the Office of Public Guardian's fiduciary duty as conservator and trustee. If the filings are late, transparency and accountability to the Court are impaired.
3. The unsealed records indicate that there remains a significant amount of money that was donated for the benefit of the Turpin siblings, but which the Office of Public Guardian has not marshaled and distributed. Specifically, the records indicate that over \$209,000 was donated to the City of Corona Chamber of Commerce, the balance of which is now managed by SAFE Family Justice Center. The records also indicate that the JAYC Foundation holds approximately \$1,000,000. It is not entirely clear why the Office

of Public Guardian did not seek to obtain and distribute these funds until recently. According to an unsealed filing by the Turpins' court-appointed attorney, the Office of Public Guardian previously claimed that it did not have the duty or ability to marshal these funds. Regardless of the reasoning, the Office of Public Guardian's failure to marshal these funds has resulted in the lack of Court oversight for the SAFE Family Justice and JAYC Foundation funds, and may have resulted in food and housing insecurity for at least some of the Turpin siblings, in direct contravention of the donors' wishes.

# Programmatic Reviews

## PART 1

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Part One of this report examines how vulnerable children and adults experience the services provided by the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) and the Office of Public Guardian (OPG) in Riverside County from a client-centered perspective. Our inquiry was focused on the perspectives of the following groups:

1. Children in foster care
2. Young people transitioning from foster care to independence
3. Adults in need of OPG services

Our findings include an overview of the County's foster care and adult conservatee care programs and services, which offers a brief assessment of federal and state law, the population served, and services offered. We then identify what is working well in each domain. We consider the adequacy and distribution of staff and resources, identify opportunities such as new policies and fresh ideas, and highlight needed improvements, including risks, concerns, and elements that are missing. Finally, we make recommendations for change based on best practices and grounded in the policy landscape. Many of our recommendations arise out of ideas generated from interviews with Riverside County personnel.

Our inquiry focused on specific functions within the Children's Services Division (CSD), Riverside University Health System-Behavioral Health (RUHS/BH), and the Self-Sufficiency Programs. For CSD, we focused on the safety, stability, and well-being of children in out-of-home-care, Non-Dependent Minors (NMDs), and transition-age youth (TAY). We also examined the work environment for social workers and supervisors. In RUHS/BH, we reviewed OPG and supporting systems. For the Self-Sufficiency Programs, we focused on the accessibility of safety net services to our most vulnerable clients; youth leaving foster care, adults under conservatorship, and individuals facing especially unstable or adverse circumstances.

We also examined the current systems for appointment of counsel for juvenile dependency and probate proceedings. Our suggestions for improvement in appointment and compensation structures are aimed at ensuring that sufficient time and focus is dedicated to legal advocacy on behalf of minors in foster care and adults under conservatorship.

Our recommendations in each of these service areas focus on improving outcomes for children and adults under Riverside County's care through policy, practice, and procedural change. Where possible, the recommendations are accompanied by quantifiable and timely benchmarks to measure the County's progress in implementation.

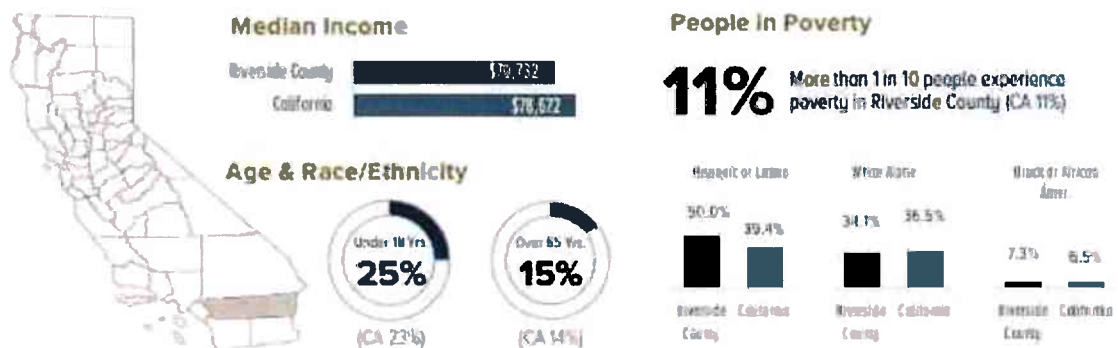
We recognize that services are provided in an economic and agency environment with real constraints, and we remained mindful of those limitations as we conceptualized reforms and

policies. In addition, we recognize that many clients in Riverside County come to services from a place of instability and trauma. Given this reality, delivering services that maximize stability, safety, and security requires not only compliance with relevant laws and policies, but also excellence in practice. Recommendations in this report reflect both ends of this spectrum.

## Background on Riverside County

Riverside County has a population of 2.4 million people and covers 7,000 square miles from greater Los Angeles to the border of Arizona. By population, Riverside County is the fourth largest county in California and the tenth largest in the United States. It has experienced steady growth, with a population increase of 10.4 percent from 2010 to 2020. As shown in the charts below, the demographics of Riverside County are similar to those of California as a whole, with some differences. Its median income is lower than the rest of the state.

Figure 1: Riverside County Demographic Snapshot Compared to California



## The Department of Public Social Services

The size and complexity of [DPSS](#) means that the lives of vulnerable children and adults experiencing instability are governed by a variety of programs. DPSS is one of Riverside County's largest departments, with almost 4,260 employees and an annual budget of \$1.2 billion. It provides a broad range of services and support to approximately one million low income people each year.<sup>5</sup> Our inquiry related to DPSS focused on three broad program areas providing direct services to clients: CSD, Adult Services Division (ASD), and the Self-Sufficiency Programs.

The **Children's Services Division** handles child welfare services for the county. CSD is tasked with investigating child abuse and neglect allegations and operating programs to promote the

<sup>5</sup> Riverside County Department of Public Social Services, "About Us," Accessed June 7, 2022.

safety, permanency, and well-being of vulnerable children. CSD contracts for services with nonprofit agencies and collaborates with other County agencies and departments to prevent and respond to child maltreatment and is responsible for the provision of out-of-home (foster) care for children and youth in need of protection.

The Adult Services Division's programs include Adult Protective Services (APS) and In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS). ASD responds to reports of abuse or neglect of older and dependent adults in Riverside County. The majority of ASD's caseload is self-neglecting clients, some of whom are also physically abused and exploited, and who are frequently poor and isolated. If there is no one willing and appropriate to help such at-risk adults, they may need conservatorship.

The Self-Sufficiency Programs administer a variety of state and federal programs focused on health care access, food assistance, cash benefits, and related housing, child care, and employment supports. Health care access includes Medi-Cal eligibility determination and enrollment, as well as connections to Covered California and the Medically Indigent Services Programs. The CalFresh program provides benefits that low-income people can use to purchase food. Cash assistance programs include CalWORKS, Refugee Cash Assistance, and General Assistance. CalWORKS clients also have access to housing assistance, child care, and Welfare-to-Work employment services DPSS manages. General Assistance clients at risk of homelessness can also access certain housing assistance services.

## Office of Public Guardian

If a court determines an adult cannot care for themselves or manage finances, the court may appoint OPG as conservator if there is no one else available and willing to serve. OPG operates through RUHS/BH. OPG serves two types of clients. Probate conservatorship clients may be older adults with dementia, developmentally disabled individuals, or a person of any age who needs protective intervention in care. OPG also serves clients with a mental disorder that makes them unable to provide for basic needs and who may need psychiatric treatment.

## Methods

We examined policies and processes pertaining to Riverside County's services to (a) children in care, (b) adults under conservatorship, and (c) those needing Self-Sufficiency services. We performed both quantitative and qualitative analyses, starting by reviewing data from a variety of sources, including Riverside County, national-level studies, the State of California, and other cities and counties. We used this information to provide context for Riverside County's human services work—for example, to determine population numbers and rates of participation in various programs, and benchmark those rates against similar counties and the whole state. We also examined publicly available documentation—including public court cases, websites, and

communications—to assess the strengths and areas in need of improvement at each point that a vulnerable person might interact with the County.

We sought deeper insight via interviews, focus groups, and surveys with County personnel and external community partners. We conducted these between January and May 2022, using a variety of sampling techniques. For interviews and focus groups, we often used a team-based approach in which there was more than one facilitator. Our interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, and we customized our questions for each set of respondents. Sample interview questions are included in Appendix C.

We interviewed appointed counsel. We also administered a survey designed for case carrying social workers, staff, supervisors, and leadership. Most survey questions used a seven point Likert scale. We also included open-ended questions for each major topic area. Our thematic analyses of the open-ended questions and summarized Likert scale results appear in the body of the report where relevant to our discussion. The complete survey and summary of findings can be found in Appendices D and E.

Qualitative data analysis methods used to assess our findings include free-coding of transcripts and independent thematic analyses of responses. Subject matter experts Dr. Erika Weissinger, Dr. Jill Berrick, and Dr. Todd Franke led the review of CSD; subject matter experts Dr. Pamela Teaster and attorney Erica Wood led the review of OPG; and subject matter experts Diana Jensen, MPP, and Dr. Weissinger led the review of Self-Sufficiency services. We contextualized our perspective by consulting other subject matter experts and reviewing best practices in the field, allowing research expertise in child welfare, public guardianship, and Self-Sufficiency services to shape our recommendations. See Appendix B for our detailed methodology for each section.

## Scope of Inquiry

The safety and well-being of children in out-of-home care and adults under conservatorship constitute the heart of this inquiry. In requesting an independent review of Riverside County's relevant policies, procedures, and practices, the County set forth a broad scope derived from the Turpin siblings' experiences. Therefore, excluded from the inquiry's scope was front-end decision-making about child removal, including hotline calls and investigations. Also excluded from our analysis were conservatorships established under the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act.



## Chapter 2: Children's Services Division

### Context

Riverside County's Children's Services Division (CSD) is responsible for a large geographic area, from the metropolitan areas of Riverside and Corona in the west, to the Arizona border in the east. In addition to parents and other adult caregivers, the County is responsible for the safety of approximately 700,000 children.

Riverside County serves a wide diversity of families. About one half of the population is Hispanic, 34 percent identify as White, 7 percent as Asian, and 6 percent as Black. A large proportion of the population is Spanish-speaking. Other dominant languages include Tagalog and Chinese. Riverside County is home to 12 federally-recognized tribal nations, though less than 1 percent of the County population self-identifies as Native American. Because of strict regulations pertaining to tribal families as a result of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), child welfare professionals must be familiar with the provisions of ICWA.

The families that child welfare agencies serve are disproportionately poor, and they struggle with a range of family and community challenges. Large bodies of literature indicate that families having contact with the child welfare system may also struggle with difficulties associated with domestic violence, housing instability, mental health, substance abuse, and/or criminal justice involvement.<sup>6</sup> These difficulties are evident in Riverside County as well. California has one of the highest poverty rates in the nation, with rapidly rising housing prices contributing substantially to family poverty.<sup>7</sup> Related to high housing costs, many families are unhoused or struggle with housing instability. California has seen a 7 percent rise in homelessness since 2000, according to federal sources.<sup>8</sup> Although calls to domestic violence services had seen a steady decline statewide from 2013 to 2019, they increased sharply during

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<sup>6</sup> Yanfeng Xu et al., "Poverty and Economic Pressure, Financial Assistance, and Children's Behavioral Health in Kinship Care," *Child Maltreatment* 26, no. 1 (February 2021); E.J. Gifford et al., "Mothers and fathers in the criminal justice system and children's child protective services involvement," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 101, (March 2020); Rebecca Rebbe et al., "Co-Reporting of Child Maltreatment and Intimate Partner Violence: The Likelihood of Substantiations and Foster Care Placements," *Child Maltreatment* 26, no. 4 (November 2021); Joseph N. Roscoe, Bridgette Lery, and Jaclyn E. Chambers, "Understanding child protection decisions involving parents with mental illness and substance abuse," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 81, (July 2018); Callie Westad and David McConnell, "Child Welfare Involvement of Mothers with Mental Health Issues," *Community Mental Health Journal* 48, no. 1 (February 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Malagon and Caroline Danielson, "California's high housing costs increase poverty." Public Policy Institute of California, August 13, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> US Housing and Urban Development, *2021 Annual Homeless Assessment Report Part 1*, (Washington, D.C.: 2022).

the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Violence and property crime rates also witnessed a modest, though steady decline in California throughout the 2000s, but are seeing an uptick since the pandemic began in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

Within this context of geographic spread, family diversity, and community challenges, the child welfare system is designed to offer protection to children who are harmed or who are at substantial risk of harm from parents or other caregivers.<sup>11</sup> Child welfare can be conceptualized as many state and local systems operating under an umbrella of broad federal mandates. The federal policies governing the child welfare system require states and—in California—counties to respond to reports of child maltreatment and take steps to ensure the safety of children. California offers a state-supervised, county-administered, child welfare system, where counties exercise modest discretion in crafting a system of response within the legal framework of the California Welfare and Institutions Code. Federal, state, and county funds support the overall system's functioning.

The child welfare system in California and Riverside County is based on principles articulated in the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997). The three primary principles are:

1. **Safety.** Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect. Children are safely maintained in their own homes whenever possible and appropriate.
2. **Permanency.** Children have permanency and stability in their living situations. The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.
3. **Well-Being.** Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs. Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs. Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

CSD attempts to enact these principles in their interactions with children, youth, families, and the community at large.

## Child Welfare System Response

CSD is typically notified about potential harm to a child via a maltreatment referral made to the child maltreatment hotline. While any person can make a referral, state law specifies a wide range of professionals mandated to make referrals if they harbor a reasonable suspicion of

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<sup>9</sup> Heather Harris, "Fewer domestic violence calls, but more incidents could be deadly." Public Policy Institute of California, April 12, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Magnus Lofstrom and Brandon Martin, "Crime trends in California." Public Policy Institute of California, January 2022.

<sup>11</sup> This description of the child welfare system is adapted from J. Lawson and J.D. Berrick, "Child protection in the United States," in *International Handbook of Child Protection Systems*, eds J.D. Berrick, N. Gilbert, and M. Skivenes, M. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press. In press).

maltreatment. When a referral alleges potential abuse or neglect of a child, staff determine whether the expressed concerns meet statutory guidelines to trigger a child welfare system response. Some referrals are screened out in this process. The remaining screened-in referrals receive an in-person assessment from a child welfare professional. The purpose of an assessment is to determine whether the circumstances and level of concern for a child's safety warrant further voluntary or involuntary services, based on the exigency of the circumstances, the vulnerability of the child, and the caregiver's willingness to engage in developing a safety plan for the child. Under certain legally specified circumstances, child welfare agency staff are required to cross-report referrals to law enforcement.

Some referrals are "substantiated," indicating that the child's circumstances fall within California's legal definition of maltreatment, and the child who is the subject of the allegation is considered to be a victim of abuse or neglect. For substantiated cases in which the assessed level of risk is low, child welfare staff may close the case without further action or refer the family to voluntary community-based services. For cases with higher levels of assessed risk, there are two case pathways representing an escalation of child welfare involvement with families: in-home services and out-of-home care (also called substitute care or foster care). In-home services—otherwise referred to as Family Maintenance services in California—may be voluntary or court-ordered. These time-limited services are designed to mitigate the risks that may otherwise be present in the family home and to strengthen parental protective capacities.

For children experiencing significant harm or a high risk of harm, child welfare staff may determine that separation from parents is the only safe alternative. In these instances, the state becomes the legal custodian of the children while the parents (usually) receive services to address the unsafe circumstances in the home.<sup>12</sup> Recommendations to involuntarily separate children and parents are made by child welfare professionals and must be confirmed by the courts. In court, interested parties' legal interests are represented by counsel. Indigent parents are typically provided legal representation, and parents with separate interests in the children may each have their own representation.

In California, children are appointed separate counsel. In addition to legal counsel, some children also may be assigned a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), a community volunteer dedicated to representing the child's best interests in court. Some evidence, though dated, suggests that fewer than ten percent of all children in out-of-home care in California benefit from the assignment of a CASA volunteer.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> State law allows for exceptions to the provision of parental services in limited circumstances.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Lawson and Jill Duerr Berrick, "Establishing CASA as an Evidence-Based Practice," *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work* 10, no. 4 (July 2013): 321–337.

Both federal and state law offer parents up to 12 months (with a possible extension of up to 6 additional months) to utilize community-based services and address the unsafe behaviors that led to the removal of their child. In California, parents of children ages 3 and younger are offered only 6 months of services, with a possible 6-month extension. Once a parent can engage in safe parenting, child welfare staff recommend to the court the child's return home. If a child cannot be returned home, child welfare staff are charged with identifying an alternative caregiver who will provide long-term care—referred to as permanency. Federal law prioritizes adoption if family reunification is not possible. Other permanency options may include legal guardianship or—for older youth—long-term foster care.

During a child's stay in care, federal and state law privilege placement with an extended relative (referred to as kinship care) or a non-related extended family member (referred to as NREFM). If there are no relatives available to serve as safe caregivers, child welfare agencies are mandated by federal law to place children in the least restrictive setting to meet their needs. For most children, this means placement in a nonrelative foster family home.

Some children and youth present with especially complex health and/or behavioral health needs. Placement options for these youth are extremely limited. In 2015, California passed the Continuum of Care Reform law (Assembly Bill (AB) 403), which limits the utilization of group or congregate care settings to short-term intensive treatment. Subsequent federal law (Family First Prevention Services Act, 2018), limited funding for congregate care, further reducing the utilization of group care for high-needs youth.

## A Data Snapshot

Previous reviews of CSD, including the 2017 Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and 2019 Swiss reports, have focused largely on the front end of the child welfare system, including child maltreatment referrals, screening, investigation and assessment, removals, and related court processes. This report focuses on the system's policies, processes, practices, and procedures following the court detention hearing—typically referred to as the “back end” of the system.

Below, we provide a snapshot of some of the known child welfare data points in Riverside County and compare these data to state averages. Although the County does not have a direct corollary with any other county in the state, some child welfare staff in Riverside indicated that their closest neighbor, San Bernardino County, can offer a rough comparison. This information is also provided for comparative purposes. We provide information from 2019 because data from 2020 and 2021—the most recent available for California—are distorted due to conditions

associated with the pandemic. Data are derived from the [California Child Welfare Indicators Project \(CCWIP\)](#), housed at UC Berkeley.<sup>14</sup>

Riverside County receives a notably higher volume of calls to the child abuse hotline compared to other counties. In 2019, for example, Riverside County received over 41,000 calls alleging suspicion of child maltreatment, 66 percent of which alleged child neglect. As a point of comparison, in 2019, the rate of child maltreatment allegations per 1,000 children statewide was 52.6; in Riverside County, the rate was 69.5 per 1,000. This larger-than-typical rate requires a significant investment of resources at the front end of the child welfare service system.

The high call volume can be attributed to two different factors. The first may simply be differences in population and demographics. Child poverty—a significant risk factor for child maltreatment—is relatively high in Riverside County. Whereas the state poverty rate for young children averages about 20 percent, child poverty within some jurisdictions of Riverside County is significantly higher.<sup>15</sup> Like many counties, Riverside experienced an increase in call volume in 2021 compared to 2020, when much of the state was dramatically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and related policies. Practitioners and experts speculate that the increase may be attributed to children's public presence in schools—where many children returned in August, 2021—and other settings where mandated reporters are more likely to observe troubling family circumstances.

As explained previously, following a child maltreatment referral, child welfare professionals assess whether an investigation is warranted. Statewide, 38.3 per 1,000 child maltreatment allegations are investigated; in Riverside County, the comparable rate is 58.5 per 1,000, another indicator that considerable resources must be dedicated to the front end of the system.

The data suggests that in Riverside County, a somewhat higher proportion of child maltreatment referrals may be "evaluated out" as inappropriate for an in-home investigation, compared to statewide averages. Further analysis suggests, however, that these differences may be an artifact of how Riverside County responds to multiple referrals on the same child.

Despite the large volume of cases managed at the front end, rates of entry to out-of-home care in Riverside County are not appreciably different from the statewide average. As shown in Figure 2 below, in 2019, 3.2 per 1,000 children entered out-of-home care statewide; in Riverside County, the rate was slightly lower at 2.8 per 1,000 children.

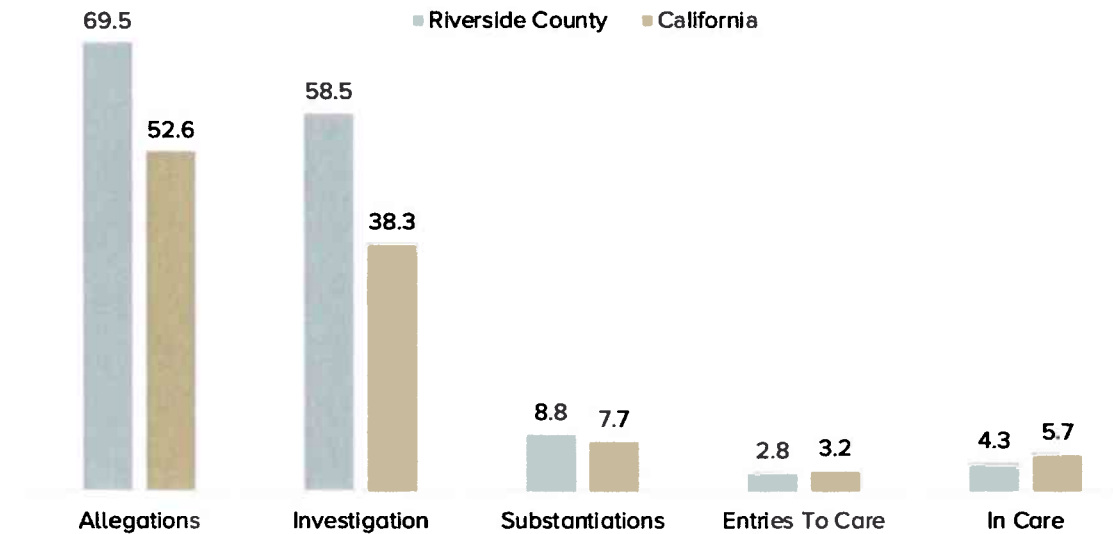
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<sup>14</sup> Daniel Webster et al., "California Child Welfare Indicators Project reports," University of California at Berkeley, 2020, Accessed March 31, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Bohn and Caroline Danielson, *Geography of Child Poverty in California*. Public Policy Institute of California, 2017.

Although Riverside County has higher rates of allegations, investigations, and substantiations, it has lower rates of entries into care and children in care compared to California as a whole.

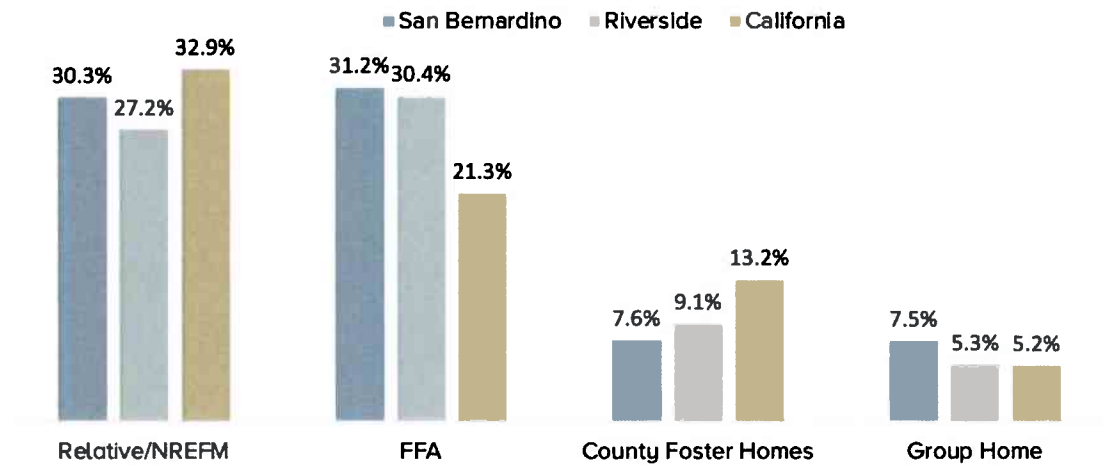
Figure 2: Report Rates Per 1,000 for Each Category (2019)



The proportion of children in care at any given time is a function of the number of children entering care, the rate of exits from care, and the proportion of children re-entering care. The statewide in-care rate was 5.7 per 1,000 in 2019. The comparable rate in Riverside County was 4.3 per 1,000. The total number of children in out-of-home care in Riverside in 2019 was 2,887, a significant decline from the peak of over 5,700 children in 2007. Following a dip in the number of children in care during the pandemic—a decline witnessed across the state—the prevalence of children in care has risen. As of January 2022, 3,309 children were in care in Riverside County.

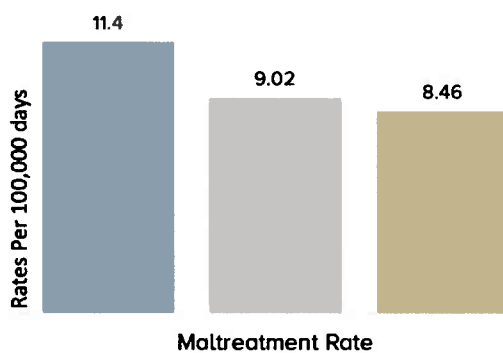
Statewide, 32.9 percent of all children were living in kinship care in 2019. Riverside County placed somewhat fewer children with kin (27.2%). Also in contrast to state averages, Riverside County relies on Foster Family Agencies (FFAs)—nonprofit organizations that recruit, screen, train, certify, and support foster parents—to certify non-kin foster parents, with 30.4 percent of their children placed in FFA care compared to 21.3 percent statewide. Because of their heavy reliance on FFAs, the County places relatively fewer children in County-approved foster homes (9.1% compared to 13.2% statewide). A small percentage of youth are cared for in congregate care settings (5.3% Riverside vs. 5.2% statewide).

Figure 3: Percentage of Placement Type in 2019



Older youth, referred to as non-minor dependents (NMDs), ages 18–21, may choose to remain in care. In 2019, 384 youth (12.4% of all children in Riverside out-of-home care) ages 18–21 were living in Supervised Independent Living Programs (SILPs) (5.9%) or Transitional housing (3.1%). The remaining almost one-third of children are cared for in a variety of settings including guardianship (11.4%), non-relative foster care homes approved by the County (9.1%), and pre-adoptive homes (1.9%).

Figure 4: Rate of Maltreatment of Children in Foster Care During 12-Month Period in 2019



Maltreatment in foster care is a relatively rare event. The phenomenon is measured as a rate per 100,000 days in care among all children in care in a given year. In 2019, the rate of maltreatment in care in Riverside County was 9.02 per 100,000 days of care, slightly higher than the rate of 8.46 per 100,000 days in care statewide.

Similar to state and national averages, about half of children entering care in Riverside County are eventually reunified with their family and returned home. Riverside saw a notable dip in the proportion of children reunified from approximately 2017 to 2019 and an attendant increase in

the proportion of children adopted during that same time frame. Since then, and during the pandemic, reunification rates rose and are again similar to statewide averages.

## Children in Care

CSD serves children ages 0–21. Mirroring state and national trends, a large proportion of children entering care in Riverside County (42.3%) are under the age of six. Following implementation of California Assembly Bill 12 in 2012, implementing the provisions of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008), California extended the opportunity for youth to voluntarily remain in care beyond age 18. Youth may choose to stay, they may leave, or they may choose to leave and re-enter care at any time prior to age 21. These NMDs are eligible for participation if they are enrolled in school or working part time, or they have a disabling condition that prevents their participation in either. As of October 2021, just under 500 youth were qualified as NMDs in Riverside County.

About three-quarters of the children entering care in Riverside have siblings who also require care. Finding safe and appropriate caregivers willing and available to take all children in a sibling group can be an added challenge.

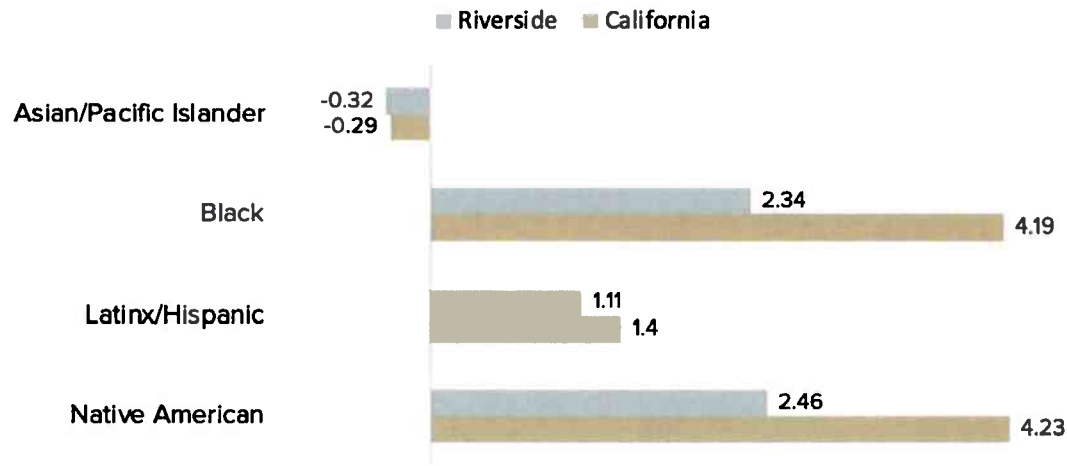
Dissimilar to state averages, the majority of children entering care in Riverside County are Hispanic/Latinx (57%)—a close reflection of county demographics. But similar to the state and all other counties, African American and Native American children are disproportionately represented in entries to care. Black children and tribal children are, respectively, 2.34 and 2.46 times more likely than white children to enter care in Riverside County (compared to a disparity ratio of 4.19:1 (Black) and 4.23:1 (Native American) statewide). The weight of the evidence suggests that these statistics can largely be explained by disproportionate need, often reflecting the structural barriers that traditionally marginalized groups have in accessing resources such as safe housing, gainful employment, adequate healthcare, and other services.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Brett Drake et al., "Racial bias in child protection? A comparison of competing explanations using national data," *Pediatrics* 127, no. 3 (March 2011); Brett Drake, Sang Moo Lee, and Melissa Jonson-Reid, "Race and child maltreatment reporting: Are blacks overrepresented?," *Children and Youth Services Review* 31, no. 3 (August 2008); Hyunil Kim and Brett Drake, "Child maltreatment risk as a function of poverty and race/ethnicity in the USA," *International Journal of Epidemiology* 47, no. 3 (January 2018).



Figure 5: Entries to Care Disparity Indices (Compared to White) in 2019



The large majority of children entering care in the United States and California are separated from their parents due to reasons associated with child neglect. In 2019, 86.1 percent of all California entries to care were associated with neglect. The comparable figure for Riverside County was 97.6 percent. Child neglect is highly correlated with family poverty, but the phenomena are not one and the same. Multiple studies have shown a range of unsafe parenting behaviors associated with child neglect, and significant harms to children that may result from neglect, including death.<sup>17</sup>

## Staffing

CSD employs approximately 204 social workers, of whom 164 are Social Services Practitioners (SSP) III and 40 are SSP I/II. These social workers are assigned to Continuing Services, Group Home, Medically Fragile, Extended Foster Care/Independent Living, and Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC). Although the target caseload set by the state for case-carrying social workers in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021–2022 was 23, the average caseload from December 2021 to February 2022 was 33.3, for an average rate of 43 percent.<sup>18</sup>

Child welfare professionals conduct a wide range of tasks based on legislative requirements and best practices. They work with families to identify service needs that can support safe parenting, broker services for parents and children, meet monthly with children and caregivers to assess the safety and quality of children's care, and inform the courts about child and family circumstances, including recommendations for children's care, safety, and permanency.

<sup>17</sup> For a review, see: Jill Berrick et al., "Research to Consider While Effectively Re-Designing Child Welfare Services: A Response to Commentaries," *Research on Social Work Practice*, (May 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Children's Services Division Dashboard (Draft document provided by DPSS).

California has made significant efforts to address the quality of services that social workers provide to child welfare-involved families. Developed in 2012, the [California Core Practice Model](#) offers a framework to guide social workers in their interactions with children and families, and highlights practice behaviors that privilege honesty, respect, accountability, and team-based decision making.<sup>19</sup>

CSD currently partners with a wide range of community-based organizations to provide services to children and families. Additionally, it contracts with 68 FFAs. FFAs attempt to match the needs of children with their foster parents; social workers in FFAs meet with children and foster parents three to four times monthly and communicate their findings to CSD social workers who coordinate and oversee care.

## Effects of COVID-19

CSD services were dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Child maltreatment referrals declined significantly. Most experts posit that the decline was likely due to closed schools and other public settings where mandated reporters were unable to observe children's needs.<sup>20</sup> Courts also closed, though hearings remained available virtually. Across the state and in Riverside County, the disruptions to court processes and the delivery of services resulted in reductions in both reunifications and adoptions. Despite the challenges associated with the pandemic, child welfare staff are considered first responders. Staff continued to visit homes in order to conduct assessments of child maltreatment referrals. Weekly and monthly visits with children in care shifted from being all in-person to being a combination of weekly remote visits with FFA social workers and monthly in-person visits from FFA and County social workers. According to some respondents, these monthly visits were often conducted outside the home for COVID-19 safety reasons.

COVID-19 ushered in a rash of changes and challenges from which CSD has not yet fully recovered. Most important, and discussed in some detail below, is the pandemic's lasting impact on recruitment and retention of CSD staff and foster parents.

## Recent CSD Reforms

In 2019, Christie B. Swiss, Esq. of Collins Collins Muir & Stewart LLP, conducted an outside assessment of Riverside County's CSD. The goal was to understand third-party claims and to develop strategies around risks of future claims. The review focused largely on CSD's processes and protocols in assessing and investigating child maltreatment referrals. In response, County administrators enacted a number of adjustments to address the potential for wrongful removals

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<sup>19</sup> California Social Work Education Center, "About the Core Practice Model," Accessed May 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Lindsey Rose Bullinger et al., "The neglected ones: Time at home during COVID-19 and child maltreatment," *Children and Youth Services Review* 131 (December 2021): 106287.

of children, and to create more streamlined and regular communication between CSD and County Counsel staff.

Also in 2019, CSD contracted with Implematix to usher in new Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) practices for CSD, designed to better realign County practices with the Division's mission and vision. Specifically, efforts focused on:

- Developing team-based and data-driven systems and processes;
- Implementing supervisory structures and staff approaches that align "strategic imperatives" with "work on the ground using data" (referred to as "line of sight" practices);
- Focusing on child and family needs as drivers of organizational practices; and
- Reorienting practices to align with learning organization principles, using benchmarks, best practices, research, and innovation to guide the organization rather than management principles that are blame-oriented, which can be demoralizing and past rather than future-oriented.<sup>21</sup>

The CQI staff receive weekly support from staff affiliated with CCWIP. They are helping County staff develop data dashboards for quick review of prominent data points relating to safety and permanency for children.

## Overarching Recommendations

Below are our overarching recommendations for CSD. These surface from the various sources of data collected during this assessment phase (see Methods, *supra* [detailing data collection]). We offer them as a backdrop to the detail provided below.

1. **Hire additional staff** in order to reduce caseloads and improve quality of care.
2. **Work collaboratively with every county department, community partners, the faith and school communities, and the media to develop an aggressive recruitment campaign for additional high-quality resource parents.**
3. **Develop strategies to streamline and bolster the County's oversight of the many FFAs with which it contracts**, including technology-based solutions to develop appropriate and high-quality foster parent matches that meet children's individual needs.
4. **Create a Strategic Initiatives Unit within CSD** with a management or director level position and personnel, without case-carrying responsibilities. The unit would implement initiatives such as Intensive Foster Care, Comprehensive Prevention/[Family First Prevention Services Act](#) (FFPSA), and critical elements of California's Core Practice Model

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<sup>21</sup> Implematix, PowerPoint Presentation, n.d.

including the [Quality Parenting Initiative](#) (QPI), [KEEP](#) (an evidence-based support and skill enhancement program for foster and kinship parents of children), and Signs of Safety, all of which are currently underutilized and not yet fully implemented.<sup>22</sup> Core functions of the unit could include governance, infrastructure development, communications, service design, testing, and CQI for strategic initiatives. The unit would contract with outside vendors to provide skills in implementing strategic initiatives. This shift would free up the Contracts Unit to manage and audit contracts rather than managing the initiatives themselves.

## Workforce

### National Context

Nationwide, child welfare agencies have struggled to maintain a sufficient workforce, which impacts their ability to ensure child and family safety and success. An Annie E. Casey Foundation article notes that “addressing staff turnover is one of the child welfare system’s greatest challenges.”<sup>23</sup> As of 2017, the latest year for which data is available, the national average turnover rate was approximately 30 percent, with some agencies’ rates as high as 65 percent.<sup>24</sup> A rate below 10–12 percent is considered optimal for the field, reflecting the significant challenge many agencies face.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated turnover rates. Often referred to as the Great Resignation, employee turnover has increased in many sectors throughout the US since the early months. By November 2021, the nation’s “quit rate” was the highest in 20 years.<sup>25</sup>

A survey of those who left their jobs during this period found the most common reasons included:

1. Inadequate pay
2. Lack of advancement opportunities
3. Lack of respect at work

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<sup>22</sup> California Department of Social Services, “Family First Prevention Services Act,” Accessed June 6, 2022; KEEP, “Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained,” Accessed June 5, 2022; Quality Parenting Initiative, “QPI – Quality Parenting Initiative,” Accessed June 6, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Top Causes of Staff Turnover at Child Welfare Agencies—and What to Do About it.” March 4, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Casey Family Programs, “How does turnover affect outcomes and what can be done to address retention?” December 29, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Kim Parker and Juliana Menasce Horowitz, “Majority of workers who quit a job in 2021 cite low pay, no opportunities for advancement, feeling disrespected.” Pew Research Center, March 9, 2022.

Child care issues and lack of flexibility were also high on the list, both of which have been particularly relevant during the pandemic. Notably, 31 percent of respondents indicated the pandemic played a role in their decision to leave, highlighting COVID-19's direct impact on retention.

Low retention within the child welfare field has a profound impact on service quality. A study conducted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that instability and high turnover in the child welfare field leads to overburdened workers who have less time to "conduct frequent and meaningful home visits in order to assess children's safety; establish relationships with children and families; and make thoughtful and well-supported decisions regarding safe and stable permanent placements."<sup>26</sup> Conversely, research has identified a direct connection between low workforce turnover and reduced rates of child re-abuse. Children who work with fewer social workers due to low turnover also experience higher rates of permanency.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding financial impact, the cost of losing one caseworker is estimated to be 30–200 percent of the existing employee's annual salary.<sup>28</sup> This estimate includes the negative impact on remaining staff and on children served, such as increased time spent in foster care. These findings demonstrate just how critical it is for child welfare agencies to invest in their workforce.

## Child Welfare Workforce Trends in Riverside County

Staffing challenges—including high turnover and vacancies—are particularly acute in CSD. In a March 2022 staff survey, 76 percent of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement "Staff turnover does not adversely impact my work." This demonstrates the direct impact these workforce challenges have on remaining staff and their ability to provide high-quality services.

In recent years, CSD has particularly struggled with low retention and high vacancy rates among staff in the Social Services Practitioner (SSP) classification, which ranges from SSP I to III. These staff carry caseloads and perform casework for children and families.<sup>29</sup> Among SSP IIIs, attrition rates have reportedly increased by 17 percent in the last four years—from 15 percent in 2019 to 32 percent in 2021. Attrition for SSP I and IIs has also increased year after year. Commonly cited reasons for leaving include stress, family reasons, or another job offer.

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<sup>26</sup> California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership, *Balancing Head & Heart: California's Child Welfare Workforce*. (2017).

<sup>27</sup> Sara Munson, *NJ DCF Workforce Report: A commitment to child welfare excellence through comprehensive workforce & leadership development*, (New Brunswick: New Jersey Department of Children and Families, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership, *Balancing Head & Heart*.

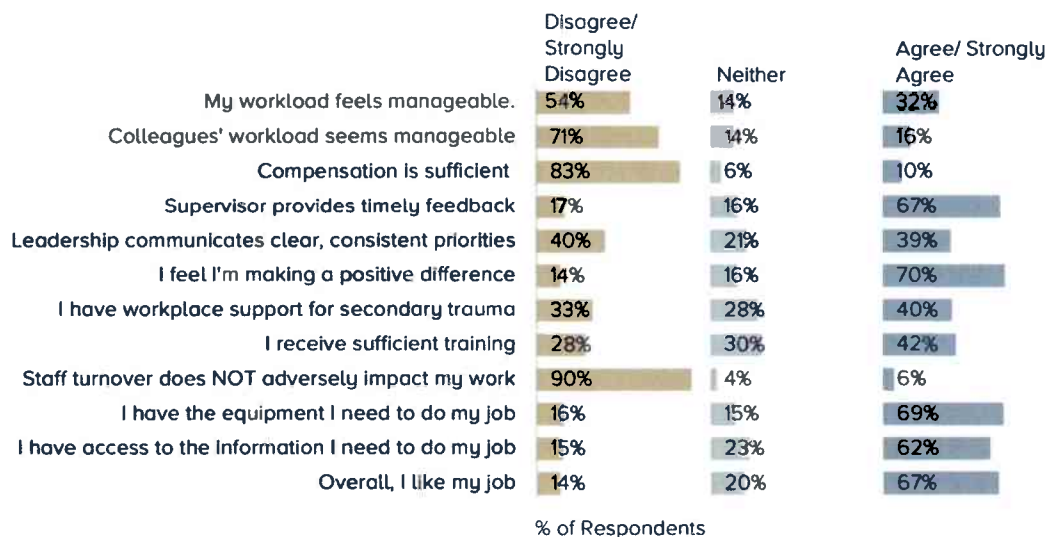
<sup>29</sup> Riverside County, "Job Descriptions – Social Services Practitioner I."

CSD also faces challenges with hiring, which increases vacancies. As of March 2022, CSD reportedly had 192 vacant positions—a vacancy rate of over 40 percent. The majority are for SSP III's (57 percent). These vacancies are fueled in part by a decrease in applicants since the pandemic, a 36 percent offer decline rate, and a high number of applicants who drop out during the interview process. According to CSD leadership, potential hires cite other job offers, family issues, and salary as primary reasons for turning an offer down.

Survey results pertaining to turnover and a broader array of workforce issues are presented in Figure 6 below. These results are discussed throughout this chapter.

**Figure 6: Workplace Assessment**

Q11 Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about your work environment.



**Causes of Low Retention**

Given the prevalence of retention challenges within the child welfare field, significant research has been conducted on its causes. A meta-analysis of over 20 of these studies identified the highest impact factors on caseworkers' decision to leave, including:<sup>30</sup>

- Stress and emotional exhaustion, driven in part by high caseloads
- Organizational commitment
- Job satisfaction

<sup>30</sup> California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership, *Balancing Head & Heart*.

Other key factors include employee well-being and safety concerns, role conflict and ambiguity, perception of fairness, organizational culture and policy, and supervisory support.

Regarding role conflict, research indicates that caseworkers value strong connections to their clients but are often overburdened with administrative work, which reduces time spent on the social work they truly enjoy. Lastly, negative public perception and media play a role in retention by making caseworkers feel demoralized and thus more likely to leave. As described below, many of these factors are at play in Riverside County.

## Strategies for Increasing Retention

To better understand how CSD can address workforce challenges—including high turnover and vacancy rates—it is important to understand “quality job” components. The Good Jobs Institute and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions both developed quality job frameworks. Combined with Casey Family Programs’ research specific to the child welfare workforce, these frameworks establish critical elements of a quality job as:<sup>31</sup>

1. **Concrete resources:** fair compensation, stable and predictable schedules, job security, and manageable workloads
2. **Positive organizational culture:** a safe and positive work environment, opportunities for meaningful staff engagement and feedback, respect and recognition
3. **Support:** high-quality supervision, peer support, and mental health resources
4. **Training and advancement:** new and ongoing employee training, professional development, and opportunities for career advancement

Below, we examine the workforce context in Riverside County through these frameworks.

## Strengths

CSD has already implemented several strategies to reduce turnover and vacancies.

### Concrete Resources

As explained in the Areas for Improvement section below, salary and workload are two primary concerns CSD staff raised concerning retention. To address some of these concerns, CSD recently provided all social workers and supervisors with a 5.5 percent pay increase. The salary increase occurred at the same time that staff feedback was collected for this report, so its effect on morale is not yet known.

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<sup>31</sup> Good Jobs Institute, “What is a ‘Good’ Job?”; Steven Dawson, “Job Design Framework,” National Fund for Workforce Solutions; Casey Family Programs, “How does New Jersey maintain a stable child welfare force?” February 7, 2022.

To reduce workload, CSD and DPSS as a whole have taken a number of steps to ensure adequate staffing levels. First, in 2020, CSD reportedly began hiring additional SSP I and II positions to provide increased support for SSP IIIs. These additional employees were hired to take on routine tasks, allowing SSP IIIs to focus more of their time on direct services to children and families. Second, CSD utilizes several recruitment and hiring strategies considered best practice in the field. For example, the Division uses continuous hiring, in which a job posting is made continuously available for applications to ensure an ongoing pool of candidates to fill vacant positions.<sup>32</sup>

CSD also offers a salary match to new hires who initially turn down their offers due to higher paying offers at other agencies. At the Department level, DPSS recruits nationally—including from colleges and universities—and creates 6-month reports to forecast staffing and recruitment needs across divisions.<sup>33</sup> CSD also recently developed a recruitment video for their hardest to fill position, the SSP III, to give candidates a better sense of what the job will be like. This practice helps ensure that new hires are more aware of the day-to-day work, reducing potential role conflict.

Beyond hiring and recruitment strategies, CSD has expanded support for social workers through the Command Post, a specialized unit that responds to emergency child abuse referrals.<sup>34</sup> Prior to 2020, the Command Post operated only at night, on the weekend, and during holidays. It has since expanded to include daytime hours in certain areas of the County, with plans to increase to 24-hour support and a larger team. As the Command Post regional manager explains, "This is a win-win situation.... It will provide better support to children...and it allows our social workers to focus exclusively on cases that require our attention[.]"<sup>35</sup> These efforts are particularly important as several staff shared that emergency cases often detract from their ability to conduct other case management activities. As one respondent said, "It feels like I am putting out fires instead of being able to work with all my [clients]."

Lastly, in terms of concrete resources, staff responding to our survey indicated they have the materials needed to do their jobs, with 69 percent strongly or somewhat agreeing that they have the necessary equipment, such as computers, phones, and tablets. This is particularly important for caseworkers who are often out in the field working directly with children and families. Additionally, 62 percent strongly or somewhat agreed that they have sufficient access to the information needed to do their work, including websites that display service availability, management reports, and workload management tools.

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<sup>32</sup> Leanne Heaton et al., *Evaluation of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's On the Frontline Initiative* (Westat, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Riverside County Department of Public Social Services, *Annual Report*, (Riverside, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Riverside County DPSS, *Annual Report*.

<sup>35</sup> Riverside County DPSS, *Annual Report*.



## Positive Organizational Culture

Staff and leadership interviewed for this report consistently affirmed how committed CSD staff are to the children and families they serve. Some staff have worked for the County for long durations and many regard the work as critical. When surveyed, 70 percent strongly or somewhat agreed that they are making a positive difference in the lives of children and families; 67 percent strongly or somewhat agreed that overall they like their job. These numbers reflect, in part, how meaningful the work is to CSD staff. As one respondent shared, "I have a passion for social work so that passion allows for me to love my job."<sup>36</sup>

Respect, recognition, and employee voices are crucial aspects of a positive work environment as well. Perhaps recognizing the role negative news can play in employee satisfaction, in 2021 DPSS began a video series to highlight both clients and staff, and has since made some additional efforts to increase transparency and to improve public perception of the Department and its staff.<sup>36</sup> CSD has also taken a number of steps to incorporate staff feedback meaningfully into improvement processes. These efforts were directly reflected in focus group feedback, with staff sharing that they feel comfortable bringing concerns forward and assured that supervisors and managers are trying to address the issues raised. To this point, DPSS conducts agency-wide workforce satisfaction surveys, which are used to inform strategic planning efforts.

CSD has also implemented a robust CQI process.<sup>37</sup> The CQI efforts, which began in late 2019, seek to understand and address problems at an organizational level, rather than blaming individual employees and their performance.<sup>38</sup> As one leader shared, "My philosophy as a leader is when organizations struggle to produce the desired outcomes, the majority of the time it is not our staff/social workers but the systems we have in place (leadership decisions, processes, technology, etc.)." This approach reflects the commitment to addressing challenges at an agency rather than individual level.

## Support

In general, supervisors' support for caseworkers was described positively. For example, among surveyed staff, the majority of respondents (67%) strongly or somewhat agreed that their supervisor provides timely feedback on their work. As a focus group participant explained, "...the workload is really heavy for us but [supervisors] provide a lot of support and without that, I'll be honest, a lot of my teammates around me, including myself, [would] probably not be able to do the job to its full function." Supervisors in several units support staff through frequent check-ins; those at the leadership level view themselves as mentors for new staff. As

<sup>36</sup> Riverside County DPSS, *Annual Report*.

<sup>37</sup> Riverside County DPSS, *Annual Report*.

<sup>38</sup> Cooper Khush, *Riverside County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) Summary of Process Improvement in CFS Division since February 2020*. (Implematix, 2021), 1 – 3.

one such leader shared, "What we're doing is mentoring the next generation of social workers...walk[ing] them through the different things that we've learned over the years that have helped us in our practice."

In addition to supervisor support, County Counsel has made additional efforts in recent years to increase support for caseworkers. County Counsel attorneys—many of whom have been employed by the County for many years—are available for consultation, including after hours. As one interviewee explained, "We have a County Counsel who is available...to answer any questions for social workers who are investigating a case in the middle of the night." To support staff's interactions with the court and to update them on new legislative requirements, they have developed a series of regular trainings, offered as brown-bag lunches. County Counsel also now plays a larger role in new employee training than in the past.

Finally, although peer support seems to be less prevalent at the social worker level, individual interviews with Deputy Directors suggested strong sentiments of mutual support within the Executive Team. These directors spoke to regular opportunities for communication across divisions, forward-looking attitudes, and a shared vision for providing quality services to families. The Deputy Directors indicated they had worked for the County—and for CSD specifically—for many years, playing various roles as line staff, supervisors, managers of other divisions, and now Deputy Directors. They reflected pride in their team approach and work towards common goals.

## **Training and Advancement**

As described in more detail below, training, particularly for new staff, is a key area for improvement for CSD. However, in regards to career advancement, some units have created new opportunities for staff to promote within the social worker classification, as well as into supervisory roles. This latter effort has resulted in new supervisors who are ready to embrace change.

## **CSD Workforce Opportunities**

In addition to the strategies described previously, CSD is engaging in new and emerging efforts to address workforce challenges.

## **Concrete Resources**

To further tackle compensation concerns (described in more detail below), CSD reported that it is in the process of conducting a wage parity study for SSP I, II, and III positions and Social Services Assistants to understand and compare CSD wages with those in neighboring counties. CSD also reportedly launched a Recruitment and Retention workgroup, which will meet monthly to discuss workforce improvement strategies. Additionally, given the increasing attrition rate

among social workers, CSD has started to conduct "stay interviews" with staff who have been with the Division for five years or more to understand why they are staying and what can be improved. These interviews will provide vital information about how workforce practices and support can be improved to increase job satisfaction. Lastly, the County is working to implement an Integrated Service Delivery System. This initiative aims to decrease duplicative intake processes and could increase efficiency, ultimately reducing caseworker workload.<sup>39</sup>

## Positive Organizational Culture

An organization's commitment to racial equity is critical for ensuring a safe and supportive workplace. In 2021, one of CSD's key initiatives was to "enhance commitment to recruiting and retaining a qualified, diverse, and culturally competent workforce."<sup>40</sup> This commitment is reflected in the recent revitalization of CSD's Racial Disparity and Disproportionality in Riverside County initiative, which has identified Workforce Development as a key priority. Notably, staff feedback collected for this report did not highlight concerns or strengths regarding racial equity within CSD.

## Support

CSD leadership has recognized the need for enhanced support for staff, particularly for new hires, and has taken some initial steps to restructure accordingly. This includes rethinking how supervisors and deputies support their teams, such as through increased hands-on training.

## Training and Advancement

With the hiring of additional entry-level staff, particularly SSP I and II positions, CSD leadership has shared their intention to support these new hires through promotion opportunities (that is, to SSP III positions) once they have gained the necessary experience and training. As one leader shared, "We have recently initiated meetings with SSP I and IIs to encourage them to promote to SSP IIIs in the future," reflecting planned efforts to further improve access to career advancement.

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<sup>39</sup> Jeff Van Wagenen, *Status Report on the Activity of the Board Ad Hoc Committee on Inter-Departmental Systems Improvements for Protection of Vulnerable Children and Adults* (Riverside County Board of Supervisors, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> Riverside County DPSS, *Annual Report*.

## Areas in Need of Improvement

Despite CSD's efforts to address high turnover and vacancy rates, social worker and leadership feedback gathered for this report reflect a number of areas in which it could further improve its practices and policies to retain staff more effectively.

### Concrete Resources

Among staff feedback collected for this report, salary, benefits, and workload were some of the most commonly identified factors contributing to poor employee retention. Regarding compensation, 64 percent of survey respondents strongly disagreed that their compensation is sufficient for their caseload and responsibilities. Staff perceive their salaries as low relative to the cost of living, social worker salaries in surrounding countries, and the stress and importance of their job. As one respondent stated, "For the type of work we do at CSD, we do not get compensated what we deserve. In-N-Out starts their employees at \$21 [per hour] while an SSP starts way below that." Several staff made similar references to higher pay in service industry jobs.

Further, seasoned staff shared several complaints specific to long-term employees. This includes capping out at a maximum salary level and the lack of cost-of-living-adjustments, both of which have left many social workers' salaries largely stagnant. Some long-term staff also shared frustration that salary incentives used to recruit new hires have resulted in an unfair pay difference between new and seasoned staff. This has left seasoned social workers feeling unrecognized for their level of experience and education, as well as for their dedication to the CSD. As one respondent to our survey shared, "The [C]ounty needs to really look at compensation of current workers for the work, time, and commitment they continue to put in daily. It is sad when workers who have been here are making less than those coming in. Where is the motivation for workers to stay here?"

Beyond salary, staff also raised concerns about the high cost of employee benefits—particularly medical and retirement—which further reduces their take home pay. One focus group participant shared that they pay more than \$1,000 per month for medical insurance, which they felt was very high.

In addition to compensation concerns, unmanageable workloads and lack of sufficient staffing were consistently identified as major issues for staff. Managers, supervisors, and staff alike referred to an "all-hands-on-deck" approach in recent months that has been extremely taxing. The majority of survey respondents (54%) strongly or somewhat disagreed that their workload feels manageable, and 71 percent answered similarly about the workload of their colleagues.

CSD has set its caseload target at 23 cases per social worker. However, data from December 2021 to February 2022 indicates its average ranged from 31 to 34 cases per social worker.<sup>41</sup> These ranges also vary significantly by unit; focus group participants reported caseloads as high as 40 to 50 in the TAY Unit and 80 to 90 in the Adoptions Unit. These numbers are especially high relative to California standards. As seen in Figure 7, California Senate Bill (SB) 2030<sup>42</sup> sets a minimum standards caseload range for child welfare staff from 13.03 for emergency removal to 23.67 for permanent placement.<sup>43</sup>

**Figure 7: SB 2030 Caseload Standards**

	Emergency Removal	Family Maintenance	Family Reunification	Permanent Placement
Minimum Standards	13.03	14.17	15.58	23.67
Optimum Standards	9.88	10.15	11.94	16.42

Riverside County's caseload rates are also high given its geographic context. Staff assigned to one region of the County may need to visit a child in a different region. Given the almost 200-mile distance from its western to eastern borders and heavy Inland Empire traffic, service to a single child in care can take almost a full day.

High caseloads directly contribute to feelings of burnout for staff who remain in their positions; they work longer hours, take on greater responsibilities, and—sometimes—see the quality of their work decline. Staff who experience burnout can lose commitment to the work and are more likely to seek employment elsewhere, or even leave the field of child welfare altogether.

One social worker said, "The amount of work [is] unmanageable and I often feel as if I am working so much, but also letting my families down because I am stretched too thin." Both social workers and Division leadership find that high caseloads leave social workers unable to focus on their clients' needs, spend sufficient time on individual cases, or build client relationships. These conditions not only impact service quality, but also caseworkers' motivation and satisfaction. Social workers feel unable to do the social work they came into the job to do.

<sup>41</sup> Riverside County Children's Services Division, *February 2022 Children's Services Division Dashboard*, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> SB 2030 required an evaluation of workload within California Welfare Services and associated recommendations, completed in 2000.

<sup>43</sup> California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership, *Balancing Head & Heart*.

One shared, "I feel like we are just checking the boxes and not doing real social work. We can't do real social work because we don't have the time."

Exceptionally high caseloads and the relative inexperience of new staff can also lead to unintentional errors and omissions. Because of the nature of the profession, these can be critical. As a survey respondent aptly summarized, "The workload/working conditions are not acceptable and we absolutely cannot ensure child safety at the level we were able to do in the past when caseloads and staffing levels were more manageable... We need help. Our people are tired and many people have resigned."

Notably, several staff referred to CSD's unmanageable workload as "a crisis." Partner agencies corroborated this perspective, with one saying, "in my decades of experience with [DPSS] I have seen things cycle through periods of being better or worse, but I have never seen it this bad. It is absolutely horrible right now," referring to the overwhelming caseloads social workers currently carry.

Focus groups with staff and supervisors indicate concerns about the relatively large share of County resources dedicated to the front end of the child welfare system (i.e., hotline calls and investigations). Echoing the concerns raised prior, the paucity of staff resources dedicated to foster care, continuing services, and TAY results in especially high caseloads and compromised services.

With rising caseloads due, in large part, to issues of social worker recruitment and retention, and the related challenge of insufficient time to closely assess and support children and families, social workers in Riverside County are experiencing significant challenges in their daily work.

## Positive Organizational Culture

While speaking about CSD's culture, some staff identified a culture of fear within the Division, one in which caseworkers are concerned about the personal implications of making a mistake. One respondent stated, "I have never seen morale this bad at DPSS in the many years I have been here. I think there is a fear-based system at the moment and employees are not valued at all." Another described a "culture of blaming everything [on] the assigned SSP." Media coverage has further fueled this fear and has contributed to an organizational climate that is blame-focused rather than learning-focused. One respondent said, "no one wants to work in child welfare anymore. It is considered family policing, decried in the media as baby snatching and thankless. Not to mention it is hugely stressful and at many times, dangerous."

Considerable evidence suggests that blame-focused organizational climates contribute to staff burnout and attrition.<sup>44</sup> Due to heightened concerns following the Turpin case, one member of the DPSS staff suggested that a "culture of fear" served as an overlay to the professional climate within the agency. Leadership and social workers alike were tearful at times regarding this criticism, with one respondent stating, "We do this work because we love it. We love the children and families we work with. We certainly don't do it for the money because there isn't any. So when media coverage says we aren't empathetic toward our families, it really hurts."

Respondents indicated that the DPSS Human Resources (HR) Department could do more to recognize loyalty. One respondent stated:

They used to do recognitions every five years. You would get a pin. It's kind of silly but it meant a lot to me to be recognized. They had a catalog you could choose something from to honor your work anniversary. Or even just a little shout-out at a meeting. I think they should honor anniversaries like one year and two years of service as well as those of us who have been here a long time, like 10, 15, 20 years or longer... Honestly these days if you make it to the one-year mark that's something to celebrate because the turnover lately has been crazy. It doesn't cost anything to just recognize our service. I guess it's just that little pat on the back that says, "Hey you did a good job today."

In addition to the lack of recognition, the hybrid work environment in which many people work from home when they are not in the field appears to be creating feelings of isolation and loneliness among workers who come to the office for work. One respondent spoke about how she missed the feelings of camaraderie when working in an office where people came to work in-person:

I used to work in a unit where we had a kids' old shoe. We called it "the kick-ass shoe" and we put it on each other's desk to say, "You kicked ass today." It was our way of seeing each other and recognizing each other. This tradition was brought about by us as co-workers. That was a good unit... It isn't like that anymore. It's empty. I am over here by myself. One day you see people's names and the next it's empty cubicles.

In addition to feelings of fear, blame, and isolation, mental health is a considerable concern among social workers who support families and children experiencing trauma. This can result in secondary trauma for staff. When asked if staff feel they have the support to process secondary trauma, survey results were mixed: 40 percent of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed

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<sup>44</sup> Catherine K. Lawrence et al., "Measuring the Impact of public perceptions on child welfare workers," *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 13, no. 4 (2019): 401-418.

that this support is present, 28 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, and 33 percent strongly or somewhat disagreed. One respondent explained, "Social workers do not operate with just facts and figures. We deal with a large amount of trauma, loss, and social injustice. These are hard premiums for the staff. Secondary traumatic stress is real, and when left unchecked, decreases productivity." Another respondent said:

There was one of the workers—she was an intern and then she became a worker during the pandemic. I saw her every day and she was crying every day. People were telecommuting and there wasn't any support during the pandemic. I was talking to her everyday and I was telling her 'hang in there you'll get through this' and she ended up quitting after six months. She had graduated with an MSW [Master of Social Work] and she was a [Title] IV-E student too.<sup>45</sup> She said she couldn't stay to pay it off.

Although CSD may be taking some steps to support the mental health of its workforce, this critical issue needs more attention. Staff feedback also revealed areas of growth for management and executive-level staff. When asked if CSD leadership communicates clear and consistent priorities to guide staff, responses were mixed, with only 12 percent strongly agreeing, compared to 20 percent who strongly disagreed. Additionally, while social workers feel comfortable providing feedback to their supervisors and managers, both they and supervisors indicated that little change has occurred as a result of this feedback due to insufficient staffing, funding, and slow bureaucratic processes. One respondent said, "They implement stuff and it goes away and it comes back. I wish they would ask us what we think works." Staff shared the feeling that higher level management does not act on supervisor feedback. One person described their supervisors and managers as "stuck in the middle" between staff and Deputy Directors. Another explained, "Management has a lot of meetings addressing the needs and have been asked by staff to hold follow-up meetings with results of the goals set and they do not follow up... with action or any concrete results."

## Support

Although many social workers spoke to the high level of support they receive from their supervisors, others were dissatisfied on this front. Respondents identified concerns about high turnover among supervisors, leading to inconsistent support, lack of sufficient training for supervisors, and punitive supervision styles, among other issues. One shared, "I think that supervisors need to be better trained to provide support. There are too many punitive and

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<sup>45</sup> Title IV-E is a federal funding stream that provides financial support to select MSW students pursuing employment in public child welfare.



hands-off supervisors. I learned best from supervisors that had the time to show me the process [compared to] those that handed me off to another person."

These challenges may be explained in part by supervisors themselves feeling overwhelmed with trying to support high numbers of new staff. Within CSD, reportedly 36 percent of SSP IIIs have two years' experience or less. Meanwhile, research indicates that it generally takes three years to learn the job. Newer staff require higher-than-average oversight, support, and close supervision, and a large proportion of CSD supervisors are new themselves. Supervisors not only describe having to take on casework to relieve overwhelmed staff, but also increased efforts to make up for new employees' lack of training and experience, resulting in burnout.

Peer support is also a challenge for CSD. Once new staff begin, they often receive high caseloads due to CSD's overall workload demands, instead of gradually taking on new cases as they learn the job. Seasoned staff then feel obligated to help support new staff in learning the work on top of their own high workloads. As one person shared, "We can't afford to not provide hands-on support to the new people coming in, but everyone is so overworked and tired to help or give [them] the attention that is needed." This lack of peer support has also been heightened with the move to teleworking, as noted by one respondent:

While seasoned staff may enjoy the flexibility of working independently at home, new staff are suffering with the lack of support.... There is unplanned learning that occurs daily for new staff in the office by overhearing others, being [able] to quickly ask questions and respond, and having access to resources.

Several respondents identified this as a reason why new staff are more likely to leave. Finally, high turnover for experienced staff results in the loss of important institutional knowledge that could benefit new hires. One respondent noted, "A lot of the experienced employees are leaving which leaves an imbalance of new to seasoned workers."

## **Training and Advancement**

As noted previously, training—especially for new hires—is an area in need of improvement for CSD. The pandemic has directly impacted its induction program. Over the past two years, CSD moved training for new staff online. New hires shared that it was difficult to absorb content through the remote learning platform. Trainers shared that they felt no one was watching them during training. Supervisors indicated that new staff are coming in with less knowledge and readiness than before. And some external partners expressed their surprise at how little new social workers knew about completing basic forms or performing functions they should have learned in training.

Beyond new hire training, seasoned staff identified a lack of incentives for professional development, noting that the County does not provide a pay differential for those who have increased education or training, such as an MSW degree or Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) license. Those who obtain higher degrees are more likely to leave for higher paying positions elsewhere.

## Recommendations

To address areas in need of improvement within CSD, the following workforce strategies, drawn from research and best practices in other agencies, should be implemented.

### Concrete Resources

1. **Further increase compensation for social workers and supervisors across positions.** Based on the results of the pending wage parity study, CSD should increase salaries to ensure parity with comparable positions in surrounding counties, as well as with the County's true cost of living. These efforts should go beyond SSPs to include Program Specialists and other key roles, which many noted have not been compensated to the same degree as SSPs.

Cost of living calculators, such as the one developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), can be used to better understand CSD's salary gaps. In Riverside County, the living wage for a single adult with one child is estimated at \$76,086.40. When comparing the salary ranges for SSPs, as shown in the figure below, there is a clear gap, particularly for SSP I and II positions. These salaries range from 16 to 36 percent below the living wage.<sup>46</sup>

Figure 8: Social Worker Salaries are below market rate

Position	Salary Range	Percent Below Living Wage for a Single Adult with One Child
SSP I	\$48,796.80–\$55,943.89 <sup>47</sup>	36%–26% below
SSP II	\$53,684.80–\$64,159.89 <sup>48</sup>	29%–16% below
SSP III	\$59,051.20–\$83,438.99 <sup>49</sup>	22% below–10% above

<sup>46</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Living Wage Calculation for Riverside County, California." Living Wage Calculator.

<sup>47</sup> Riverside County, "Job Descriptions – Social Services Practitioner I."

<sup>48</sup> Riverside County, "Job Descriptions – Social Services Practitioner II."

<sup>49</sup> Riverside County, "Job Descriptions – Social Services Practitioner III."

Numerous staff spoke about the rising cost of living in the County. One respondent said, "The cost of living in Riverside County has increased dramatically, however, the pay has not and therefore we have staff that are financially struggling even with Master's Degrees." In addition to a one-time raise to ensure greater parity for Riverside County staff, CSD should commit to annual cost of living adjustment (COLA) for all staff.

To address these challenges, CSD could follow the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services' example. Facing similar issues in 2016—as well as a slew of negative media attention—it reviewed the salaries of in-state teachers and child welfare staff in comparable states to identify needed increases for its own employees.<sup>50</sup> The Department then secured additional state funding to implement the increases by educating policymakers about the direct connection between a strong, well-resourced workforce, and child and family safety and success. These efforts, with other workforce strategies, resulted in a 27.5 percent reduction in social worker turnover in just one year.

2. **Reduce employee contributions to medical and retirement benefits.** Many staff identified the high cost of employee benefits—particularly medical and retirement—as a reason staff are unsatisfied with their current compensation. Any effort to increase social worker compensation must consider the impact employee benefit contributions have on workers' take-home pay.
3. **Set caseload limits for all units.** Caseloads should be manageable enough that social workers can keep appointments with clients, conduct quality visits and investigations, return phone calls and emails within one business day, and complete case documentation accurately and on time. To achieve this, CSD should follow best practices in assigning an appropriate number of cases. The Council on Accreditation offers the following guidance on caseload standards:
  - a. Social workers should maintain a manageable workload, and cases are assigned according to a system that takes into consideration:
    - i. the qualifications and competencies of the worker and the supervisor;
    - ii. the status and complexity of the case, including intensity of child and family needs and size of the family;
    - iii. services provided by other professionals or team members; and
    - iv. other agency responsibilities.

Generally, caseloads should not exceed 12–25 families, depending on the unit. Smaller caseloads alone will not fully address the problem. Leadership must also make standards

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<sup>50</sup> Casey Family Programs, "How did Texas decrease caseworker turnover and stabilize its workforce?," May 14, 2018.

explicit and take actions to ensure they are followed. This could include creating a back-up unit of retired, on-call social workers to mobilize during surges or during staff shortages.

4. **Increase clerical support for social workers.** CSD should provide dedicated clerks to assist social workers with documentation such as visit logs and case notes. Some states have seen success with social workers calling clerks to enter data while social workers are driving, or in situations where they cannot type but are able to dictate. Dedicated clerks can develop specialties such as obtaining birth certificates, social security numbers, and California IDs for youth. This would enable social workers to spend more time interacting with children and families and less time at their computers—a key complaint. Alternatively, CSD can address some of these needs by augmenting its contracts with FFAs to include the completion of documentation requirements and writing of court reports for the children under their care.
5. **Improve hiring practices to reduce vacancies and workload.** This begins with strategies to hire qualified staff who are equipped to take on challenging but rewarding work. As a first step, CSD should clearly define the core competencies, responsibilities, and educational attainment required for key positions and rooted in the Division's mission and vision.<sup>51</sup> Building off its continuous job postings, CSD can then develop a pool of pre-qualified and pre-screened applicants to fill new vacancies quickly. New Jersey's Department of Children and Families (DCF) instituted these practices in 2006 after identifying the need to reduce both turnover and vacancy rates. By 2016, it reduced its turnover rate by more than half and has since maintained a 6 to 10 percent turnover rate and a vacancy rate of less than 2.5 percent.<sup>52</sup>

Team-based hiring has also proven successful in other child welfare agencies. In this model, supervisors and social workers collaborate to screen and interview candidates.<sup>53</sup> Not only can this produce qualified hires who will stay with the agency longer, but it also demonstrates to participating social workers that their input matters.

Expediting the onboarding process for new hires by streamlining background checks and other steps in the hiring process that cause delays can also help. Hiring new social workers should be approached with the same urgency as assisting with an emergency involving the safety of a child because inadequate staffing ultimately impacts child safety.

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<sup>51</sup> Munson, *NJ DCF Workforce Report*.

<sup>52</sup> Munson, *NJ DCF Workforce Report*.

<sup>53</sup> Heaton et al., *Evaluation of Annie E. Casey Foundation*.

6. **Create a strategic initiative for workforce retention and enhancement.** This initiative should be managed by the new Strategic Initiatives Unit. The purpose of the initiative would be to provide additional resources to drive planning and implementation of workforce recommendations, and thus avoid burdening front-line staff with time consuming work groups.

## Positive Organizational Culture

1. **Address critical incidents as system-wide learning opportunities.** In addition to CSD's CQI efforts—which aim to shift the focus of poor performance from individual employees to organizational barriers—CSD can take additional steps to combat its culture of fear. To that end, it can invest in manager training on safety science. Safety science:

involves an in-depth, systemwide analysis of how to respond to critical incidents, such as child deaths. For example, rather than responding to a single critical incident with blame, safety science involves a comprehensive review of critical incidents and a system-wide approach to understand the factors that influence both the quality and delivery of services.<sup>54</sup>

For example, Arizona's Department of Child Safety began tracking the number of fatalities and near-fatality cases. Then, it interviewed staff who worked on these cases to understand what occurred, how decisions were made, how staff felt about the incident, and what could be learned from the situation. Texas's Department of Family and Protective Services implemented a centralized performance management model to address infractions and engage in early coaching and counseling to prevent issues from escalating into critical incidents.<sup>55</sup>

2. **Develop a peer support program for critical incidents and overall employee well-being.** Peer support programs are common in highly challenging professions, such as firefighting, medicine, and child welfare. For example, New Jersey's DCF instituted the Worker2Worker Program for social workers. This confidential peer-counseling support hotline is operated seven days a week by former child welfare employees and supervisors who provide telephone assessments and referral services. In addition to the hotline, the program provides in-person debriefing for staff when traumatic events

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<sup>54</sup> Debra K. Davenport, *A Special Report of the Arizona Department of Child Safety—Staff Retention, Recruitment, and Training*. (Phoenix: Arizona Auditor General, 2017).

<sup>55</sup> Casey Family Programs, "How did Texas decrease caseworker turnover."

occur, and hosts resiliency and self-care events. In its first four years of operation, the Worker2Worker program assisted over 11,000 caseworkers.

Similarly, the Arizona Department of Child Safety's Workforce Resilience - Peer Support Program was developed to "enhance an employee's ability to navigate through workplace and personal stress to improve employee well-being."<sup>56</sup> The Peer Support team includes employee volunteers trained in areas such as secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and responding to critical incidents. They provide both in-person and virtual support.

3. **Increase team building events for all staff.** Hold regional in-person events involving dynamic guest speakers with opportunities for small group break-out sessions and sharing amongst peers. This will help create cross-functional support networks and friendships that encourage staff to stay in their jobs. It may also allow staff to identify co-workers in other units who can assist with difficult cases and other workplace challenges. Moreover, these events generate energy around initiatives and philosophies that CSD seeks to promote, such as deep dives into elements of the Core Practice Model. Lastly, such team-building can engage new employees who have had less in-person work experience.
4. **Highlight staff accomplishments on an ongoing basis both virtually and in-person.** Getting an award makes people feel good, but "the real benefits of awards are seen long after the initial glow wears off."<sup>57</sup> Studies have found that when employees are given awards, they are likely to work harder, to be more engaged, and to have higher intrinsic motivation. In other words, more recognition inspires employees to enjoy their work more and do a better job.

DPSS's HR and CSD can implement this through online solutions such as [Kudoboard](#) and [Tribute](#).<sup>58</sup> Virtual or remote employee recognition should highlight staff promotions and recognize supervisors or peers performing exceptional work.<sup>59</sup> Involving staff's families and other community members in these events can be particularly motivating.<sup>60</sup> DPSS's HR Department can also honor work anniversaries for CSD employees. Reaching a one-year employment anniversary for many new social workers is an important milestone to recognize.

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<sup>56</sup> Arizona Department of Child Safety, *Workforce Resilience – Peer Support Program*. (2018).

<sup>57</sup> Bruno S. Frey and Jana Gallus, *Honours versus Money: The Economics of Awards* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>58</sup> Kudoboard, "Kudoboard," Accessed June 9, 2022.; Tribute, "Tribute," Accessed June 9, 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Munson, *NJ DCF Workforce Report*.

<sup>60</sup> Casey Family Programs, "Texas decrease caseworker turnover."

5. **Create intentional opportunities for connection in a remote workplace.** As telecommuting becomes more common in the aftermath of COVID-19, HR needs to do more to foster community building on-line. Hosting events with guest speakers on remote meeting platforms that provide many breakout opportunities for employees to meet and speak with each other is one way to provide opportunities for connection. Hosting topic-specific on-line support groups is another strategy.
6. **Participate in community events to improve public perception.** Given the adverse impact of negative media coverage and public perception of social workers, several child welfare agencies have made additional investments in community education, such as attending community events, to share information about their work and successes.<sup>61</sup> Direct outreach to media editors and other leaders to discuss the nature of and risks associated with the work may also be helpful in light of recent critical incidents.

## Support

1. **Increase support for new social workers through mentorship.** The high rate of new staff hires has taken a toll on the Division. New employees feel overwhelmed and under-prepared, and seasoned employees and supervisors feel burned out trying to support a less experienced workforce. Reinstating a mentorship program to match new hires with experienced retirees to provide guidance and support can address this critical issue. Staff shared that such opportunities were available in the past and viewed positively.

Texas's Department of Family and Protective Services developed a mentorship program for staff in which mentors were recruited among seasoned employees rather than retirees and provided with a stipend for their time.<sup>62</sup> This strategy may become more feasible as workloads decrease for existing staff, and it will have the added benefit of recognizing and compensating long-time staff for their expertise.

In addition to a mentorship program, CSD can create opportunities for new hires to network through social hours and meet-ups, remote and in-person brown-bag trainings, and days of the month in which all staff are encouraged to complete their desk-work at the office rather than remotely.

2. **Establish an Office of Staff Health and Wellness.** To address secondary trauma, stress, and burnout, CSD can invest in a team or office dedicated to supporting staff's health and wellness. This proved impactful for New Jersey's DCF, which made staff

<sup>61</sup> Munson, *NJ DCF Workforce Report*.

<sup>62</sup> Casey Family Programs, "Texas decrease caseworker turnover."

wellness a priority and included staff's families in the service offering. According to New Jersey's DCF's website, "The Office's purpose is to engage staff in resources and supports that foster overall physical and emotional well-being, strong morale, and a culture of inclusivity and empowerment."<sup>63</sup> The Office of Staff Health and Wellness trains leadership on trauma and resilience, hosts workforce well-being groups, provides mindfulness resources, and has instituted additional security measures and tools. By establishing a similar office, CSD can make clear its dedication to staff well-being and provide caseworkers with a clear and dedicated resource to turn to.

## Training and Advancement

1. **Tailor employee training to core competencies and increase field training.** To ensure staff are better prepared to tackle demanding caseloads, CSD should use their feedback to re-examine and, if needed, re-define the core competencies required for success in each position. CSD can then enhance its training program for both new and continuing employees to directly reflect these competencies.

Texas's child welfare agency shifted from a lengthy classroom-focused training model for new hires to a more balanced approach, in which trainees get almost immediate experience in the field. This approach "provides new caseworkers with hands-on experience earlier, and it helps determine fit between the individual and the job more quickly."<sup>64</sup> Trainees are subsequently given a reduced caseload and meet frequently with their supervisors to discuss their progress on the agency's core competencies. An evaluation of Texas's training model found that caseworkers felt more prepared for their positions and more likely to remain with the agency under the new approach.

New Jersey's DCF has also seen an increase in training quality and take-up rate after developing a university partnership to provide staff with comprehensive professional development courses and training opportunities.<sup>65</sup> Riverside can tap into one of the many California State Universities or the University of California system to forge a similar partnership, providing benefits to both entities.

2. **Resume in-person induction for new social workers.** Given concerns about online training, CSD should develop plans for in-person induction in the next training cycle. The induction process is too important for new social workers to miss, particularly in an environment where they must accept caseloads with limited mentorship after induction.

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<sup>63</sup> New Jersey Department of Children and Families, "DCF Office of Staff Health & Wellness."

<sup>64</sup> Casey Family Programs, "Texas decreases caseworker turnover."

<sup>65</sup> Munson, *NJ DCF Workforce Report*.



When remote training is offered, trainers should include opportunities for breakout rooms for participants to meet each other and connect meaningfully.

3. **Provide bi-annual training on foundational skills.** Enhanced training for new employees is critical, but it is equally important to reinforce these skills and information on a recurring basis. CSD can accomplish this by providing training for all staff every six months that cover topics included in the induction training. This can also be an opportunity to dive deeper into such topics, and to allow employees to reflect on how they have incorporated their initial training into their day-to-day work and the areas in which they may need further support.
4. **Strengthen the induction curriculum for social workers serving TAY and hold TAY-focused training bi-annually for all social workers serving these youth.** Review the curriculum to identify areas to strengthen. Key areas for review include services and support available to TAY, how to facilitate connection to services, goal setting and planning for teens, and developmentally appropriate engagement approaches. Engage the TAY Working Group to review key portions of the curriculum. Presenters at induction training can include former foster youth, the Independent Living Program (ILP) and other service providers, and resource families.
5. **Incentivize higher education and professional development by offering an increased pay differential for staff with advanced degrees and/or licenses.** At present, staff do not feel compensated for advanced education and thus do not feel motivated to pursue it. One respondent notes, "Most social workers with Master's degrees leave within two years for better pay." To combat this, CSD should either consider a stipend for advanced degrees and licenses, or develop salary levels that more clearly take these into account.
6. **Develop leadership positions for personnel without case-carrying responsibilities who can effectively manage key initiatives** such as Contracts with FFAs, implementing critical aspects of California's Core Practice Model, and the QPI.

## Technology to Support CSD

Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) is California's State Automated Child Welfare Information System. The CWS/CMS system has been in place for more than two decades and is widely considered to be antiquated. Social workers who are newer to the workforce and more familiar with contemporary technology find CWS/CMS to be particularly cumbersome. The State is currently overhauling the system to create the Child Welfare Services - California Automated Response and Engagement System (CWS-CARES). This is needed to make the system easier to use and to address wide ranging shortcomings.

One major deficit of CWS/CMS is identifying available placements and matching them with children in need. Placement coordination is a particular area of improvement for Riverside County when it comes to technology. According to interviews with FFAs and CSD, when a child is placed in the County's care, the County Placement worker sends the placement request en masse to all the relevant FFAs. Many agencies then "reply all" to the messages so that others know if they have a bed.

Given the deficits of CWS/CMS in placement identification and provision, some California counties have contracted with an outside vendor called [Binti](#) for the purposes of placement identification.<sup>66</sup> Riverside County has periodically considered using Binti or other software with a similar function. At the time of this writing, the lack of adequate technological support for placement creates severe challenges for social workers, children, and providers. This important issue, and the role that software such as Binti can play, is discussed in greater detail in the section on placements for children in foster care.

Apart from the serious concerns regarding lack of access to effective placement software, few other comments were made about information technology in interviews or survey responses. Some respondents mentioned the need to modernize how DPSS shares information with clients and social workers. This included requests to make the DPSS website easier to navigate and adding more resources and links to help social workers and clients identify services. Others suggested the widespread use of social media, email, and texting instead of providing clients with paper brochures and forms.

## Placements for Children: Kinship Care

### Context

When foster care is required to preserve a child's safety, federal law specifies that child welfare agencies must seek and identify appropriate kin whenever possible to serve as foster parents. In California, kinship caregivers undergo a home study and background check that parallels the home assessment process for non-kin (with some exceptions) and a judicial officer of the juvenile court renders a placement decision. Kin who meet the same licensing requirements as non-kin are eligible for foster care subsidies.

Child welfare policy and practice vis-à-vis kin has evolved gradually over time. At one time, kin were intentionally avoided as alternative caregivers out of concern that kin would be unable to maintain the boundaries of safety for children and worries that kinship caregiving might mirror

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<sup>66</sup> Binti, "Foster Care Software," Accessed June 9, 2022.

the care of children's parents. Today, relatives are embraced as the best placement alternative, assuming that they can provide safe and appropriate care.

The research analyzing kinship foster care suggests that it is typically more stable—children are less likely to move from placement to placement.<sup>67</sup> Further, relatives are more likely to take in sibling groups, which prevents siblings from being separated.<sup>68</sup> Relatives, however, have their limits. Various studies indicate that they typically take children who are less behaviorally challenged and/or who present with fewer health or mental health concerns. In cases involving health or behavior concerns, relatives may be available to support children in other ways, but may not be able to serve as a placement setting.

Identifying kin is not always straightforward. In the past, the process was limited to soliciting a parent's wishes. But parents interacting with the child welfare system may not fully disclose the names or locations of family members. This can occur because they are unaware of family connections, the relationships may be strained or distant, or they may feel shame for their involvement with child welfare and prefer to hide that information from family. New technologies have ushered in model strategies to identify a wide range of family members, some of whom might be unknown to the birth parent or child. Efforts to contact and engage these adults can sometimes result in an appropriate foster placement for a child, or at minimum, an additional family member who can provide other types of family support (i.e., babysitting, tutoring, transportation to school or appointments, etc.). [Family Finding](#) was developed by Kevin Campbell in 2008 as a best practice for identifying and engaging family members in children's care. Although it does not appear to have an impact on the likelihood of reunification or the stability of care, it appears to offer benefits in terms of legal and relational permanency, marshaling more adults in the care of children, and developing connections as children age out of care.<sup>69</sup>

Coupled with Family Finding, other model approaches such as [Child and Family Team Meetings](#) (CFTMs) are designed to engage family members as children's supporters and allies.<sup>70</sup> Family members and close friends are invited to meet with child welfare, mental health, and allied professionals to help identify child and family needs, and to consider a range of formal and informal strategies to address those needs. Included in the Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) or

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<sup>67</sup> Jennifer Osborne et al., "Placement stability among children in kinship and non-kinship foster placements across multiple placements," *Children and Youth Services Review* 126, (July 2021): 106000.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Zinn, "Kinship family relatedness, nuclear family contact, and social support among foster youth," *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 11, no. 1 (2017): 1–26.

<sup>69</sup> Miriam J. Landsman, Shamra Boel-Studt, and Kelli Malone, "Results from a family finding experiment," *Children and Youth Services Review* 36, (January 2014): 62 – 69; Scott C. Leon, Deborah J. Saucedo, and Kristin Jachymiak, "Keeping it in the family: The impact of a Family Finding intervention on placement, permanency, and well-being outcomes," *Children and Youth Services Review* 70, (November 2016): 163–170.

<sup>70</sup> California Department of Social Services, "Child and Family Teams (CFTs)," Accessed June 9, 2022.

2015, CFTMs are now required for all children entering out-of-home care within 60 days of placement (Welfare & Institutions Code Section 16501). Some children may be subject to multiple CFTMs if, for example, they are placed in a group home or Short-term Residential Therapeutic Program (STRTP), or if they require intensive care coordination due to a health or mental health condition. CFTMs can be used early on in a child's placement to help identify family members as placement resources or as other supports. They can also be used throughout a case to identify previously undiscovered family members. Findings from studies of group decision-making models suggest that families are more likely to be connected to needed services such as parenting and mental health services following a team meeting, though these models are less likely to have impacts on placement outcomes (e.g., stability or permanency).<sup>71</sup>

Together, Family Finding and CFTMs should result in the identification of safe caregivers willing to support the child and family over time. Statewide, approximately one-third of all children in out-of-home care reside with relatives (34.9%). In Riverside, the figure is slightly lower at 32 percent.

## Strengths

The staff we spoke with who are assigned to Child and Family Team units are deeply committed to the work. One staff member noted:

I think just having everybody together in one spot virtually, you know. So if somebody, you know, has a question...they get to bring it up there and then. Having the kiddos there is a big strength, because then they can...talk for themselves, advocate for themselves, say what's working, what's not working.

## Opportunities

Numerous child welfare staff noted the difficulties conducting CFTMs with family members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meetings have been occurring via video conferencing since the beginning of the pandemic and staff noted many limitations associated with this approach. In particular, many parents do not have access to computer technology that allows them to fully participate via the remote video platform. Instead, many can only participate via telephone. Social workers suggest that the lack of face-to-face contact makes it difficult to engage meaningfully. Alternatively, some staff indicated that CFTMs can reach a much larger group of

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<sup>71</sup> Child and Family Teams are alternatively referred to as Family Group Conferencing, Family Group Decision Making, and Team Decision Making. Research has largely focused on Family Group Decision Making. Stephanie Cosner Berzin et al., "Does family group decision making affect child welfare outcomes? Findings from a randomized control study," *Child Welfare* 87, no. 4 (2008): 35-54; Elizabeth C. Weigensberg, Richard P. Barth, and Shenyang Guo, "Family group decision making: A propensity score analysis to evaluate child and family services at baseline and after 36-months," *Children and Youth Services Review* 31, no. 3 (March 2009): 383-390.

family members when conducted virtually. Some noted that family members from other countries can participate virtually, whereas that would be impossible if meetings were entirely in person.

As the pandemic wanes and services transition to an in-person context, County staff may be able to use the lessons of the pandemic to incorporate family members into CFTMs virtually if they have no other means of participation.

## Areas in Need of Improvement

Riverside County's proportion of children residing with kin in out-of-home care is slightly lower than the state average. We understand that current practice in identifying kin as viable placement resources rests largely with birth parents who name family members and friends. Other counties in California appear to make greater use of [Family Finding](#) strategies and [CFTMs](#) following a detention hearing.<sup>72</sup>

## Recommendations

- 1. Make better use of Family Finding efforts to identify viable kinship placements when children are placed in out-of-home care.** Riverside County saw a significant dip in the utilization of kin around 2018, however, it has inched up since that time. While we cannot determine the reasons for this variability, we encourage the robust use of Family Finding strategies during the period immediately following a detention hearing to identify safe and appropriate kinship placements.
- 2. Use CFTMs strategically to identify family members who might serve as a placement or other resource.** Staff with whom we spoke described the benefits of CFTMs for identifying children's needs and related services. They placed less emphasis on the potential for using CFTMs to continue to identify family members who might serve as a resource to children and parents. These resources might include child placement or other informal supports.
- 3. Develop policies and support initiatives to strengthen and increase kin placements when kin are identified.** Encourage increased use of non-safety waivers for kin providers. For example, if a grandmother has a driving under the influence (DUI) charge from 15 years ago, but the placement is otherwise safe and appropriate, a waiver may be considered. Similarly, when children are awaiting placement overnight,

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<sup>72</sup> A Family for Every Child, "Home," Accessed June 9, 2022.; California Department of Social Services, "Child and Family Teams (CFTs)."

consider increasing the utilization of weekend visits with kin placements who cannot be approved on an emergency basis.

- a. Some kin may offer safe and appropriate homes, but have difficulty meeting licensing requirements because of limitations in their home (e.g., non-functioning smoke detector, medicine cupboards that do not lock). Efforts to develop community volunteers and partners who can support these material needs could expedite the licensing process and allow children to be safely placed with relatives.

4. **Make greater use of hybrid in-person and remote access to CFTMs.** As the pandemic wanes, we anticipate that the majority of CFTMs will be hosted in person. Drawing on the lessons learned during the pandemic, however, we hope that staff can be flexible in allowing remote access to family members who cannot attend, either due to geographic challenges, work-related obligations, or other barriers.
5. **Create a placement initiative to improve the number of highly effective out-of-home care providers.** This initiative should be managed by the newly formed Strategic Initiatives Unit. The purpose of the initiative would be to provide additional resources to drive planning and implementation of placement-related recommendations and thus avoid burdening front-line staff with time-consuming work groups.

## Placements for Children: Foster Care

### Context

Experts largely view children separated from their parents and placed in out-of-home care as some of the most vulnerable in the United States. Substantial evidence suggests that they suffer from the highest rates of chronic health conditions of all child populations.<sup>73</sup> According to one US study of a nationally representative sample of children having contact with the child welfare system, almost one-third (27%) of children entering foster care have a chronic or recurrent health condition, and two-thirds have a significant cognitive, social, or behavioral health need in the clinical range.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Laurel K. Leslie et al., "The physical, developmental, and mental health needs of young children in child welfare by initial placement type," *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* 26, no. 3 (June 2005): 177-185.

<sup>74</sup> Administration on Children and Families, Office of Planning Research, and Evaluation, *Who are the children in foster care? Research Brief No. 1.* (2007).

Children and youth in out-of-home care typically evidence higher rates of mental health problems than peers of a similar age not in care.<sup>75</sup> Depending on the study, between 35–85 percent of all children in out-of-home care suffer from a mental health condition.<sup>76</sup> In addition to their health and mental health challenges, a substantial proportion of foster children and youth suffer from a range of developmental disorders, including developmental delays (an estimated 19% of the foster care population compared to 4.6% of the general child population), and speech and language disorders (17.8% of children in foster care compared to 4.8% in the general child population).<sup>77</sup>

Older youth in care may be struggling with substance abuse issues and some may have experienced human trafficking. One study examined the prevalence of five mental health conditions among youth ages 12–17.5 in care. The findings suggested that 43 percent reported at least one of the following mental health concerns: substance abuse/use (23%), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (19%), suicidality (14%), anxiety (14%), or depression (9%).<sup>78</sup> These circumstances not only require a thoughtful parenting response in the home, but they also demand significant advocacy efforts to ensure that a range of service providers in the community meet children's needs.<sup>79</sup>

Sometimes referred to as *resource parents*, foster parents serve as children's caregivers when parents, extended relatives, or close family friends are unable to care for them. We use the terms interchangeably. Foster parents play two essential roles. One may be termed "bureaucratic" and the other "familial."<sup>80</sup>

In the *bureaucratic* role, foster parents serve as service providers for the child welfare enterprise, attending to the child's needs and responding to the system's requirements on behalf of the government. Ideally, they serve as a professional team member<sup>81</sup> working in collaboration with child welfare professionals. In their bureaucratic role, foster parents might be

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<sup>75</sup> Lucy A. Bilaver, Judy Havlicek and Matthew M. Davis, "Prevalence of special health care needs among foster youth in a nationally representative survey," *JAMA Pediatrics* 174, no. 7 (July 2020): 727–729.

<sup>76</sup> Mira Vasileva and Franz Petermann, "Attachment, Development, and Mental Health in Abused and Neglected Preschool Children in Foster Care: A Meta-Analysis," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 19, no. 4 (October 2018): 443–58.

<sup>77</sup> Bilaver, Havlicek, and Davis, "Prevalence of special health care needs," 727–729.

<sup>78</sup> Sarah McCue Horwitz et al., "Mental health problems in young children investigated by US child welfare agencies," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 51, no.6 (June 2012): 572–581.

<sup>79</sup> Josh Fergeus et al., "Supporting foster and kinship carers to promote the mental health of children," *Child and Family Social Work* 24, no. 1 (February 2019): 77–83.

<sup>80</sup> Jill D. Berrick, "Research and practice with families in foster care," in *Contemporary Families: Translating Research into Practice*, edited by Scott Browning and Kay Pasley. (New York: Routledge Press, 2015).

<sup>81</sup> Catherine E. Rymph, *Raising Government Children: A History of Foster Care and the American Welfare State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

required, for example, to transport a child to therapy or to visitation sessions with the parent. They are also required to fulfill the child's court-mandated case plan requirements, to file appropriate documents with child welfare professionals, or to attend meetings at the child welfare department. If the case plan includes reunification, the foster parent is required to support the birth parents in their efforts to reunify with their child.

In the *familial* role, foster parents serve as substitute parents to the child, engaging in behaviors that would be typical among highly effective parents. Features of "successful" foster parents suggest that they are warm and child-centered. They are stable, loving, nurturing, fair, and respectful. Their relationship is enduring.<sup>82</sup> Caregivers support children's development, their cultural heritage, and their birth and extended family.<sup>83</sup>

Although the majority of studies on foster parents focus on foster mothers, emerging literature on foster fathers suggests that they play a particular role in being positive role models and in showcasing a range of parenting tasks.<sup>84</sup> In addition to these parenting qualities, it is widely understood that the requirements of foster parents extend well beyond typical parenting.<sup>85</sup> The circumstances of children's separation from their parents, the court and child welfare agency's involvement with their family, and the unique behavioral and emotional challenges posed by children who have usually experienced trauma create an exceptional care environment, referred to by some authors as "parenting plus."<sup>86</sup>

The demands placed on foster parents are significant, but perhaps none are so great as the emotional requirements of care. Foster parents are asked to make an unconditional commitment to the children in their home, loving them as though they were a child from their original family. At the same time, foster parents are expected to release the child to the birth parent if reunification is required by the courts. Falling in love and then letting go is very difficult. Evidence suggests that although foster parents often celebrate children's return home, many also experience a high degree of loss and grief as part of the process.

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<sup>82</sup> Ian Sinclair and Kate Wilson, "Matches and Mismatches: The Contribution of Carers and Children to the Success of Foster Placements," *The British Journal of Social Work* 33, no. 7 (2003): 871-84.

<sup>83</sup> Aron R. Shlonsky and Jill D. Berrick, "Assessing and promoting quality in kin and nonkin foster care," *Social Service Review* 75, (March 2001): 60-83.

<sup>84</sup> Damien Wayne Riggs, Martha Augoustinos, and Paul DeFabbro, "Foster fathers and care work: Engaging alternate models of parenting," *Fathering* 8, no. 1 (2010): 24-36.

<sup>85</sup> Hamido A. Megahead and Elizabeth Soliday, "Developing a Conceptual Framework of Foster Family Placement," *Journal of Family Psychotherapy* 24, no. 1 (2013): 48-63.

<sup>86</sup> Jill D. Berrick and Marit Skivenes, "Dimensions of high quality foster care: Parenting Plus," *Children and Youth Services Review* 34, no. 9 (September 2012): 1956-1965.



## Foster Parent Recruitment in a Challenging Context

Because of these and other challenges, recruiting community members to foster care is challenging. Ample evidence suggests that the supply of available foster parents does not meet the demand for care from children,<sup>87</sup> and that this phenomenon is global.<sup>88</sup> Most California counties are seeing a decline in the census of available foster caregivers.<sup>89</sup> Ahn et al. argue that the reasons for the continuing decline in the foster parent census is due to changing demographic forces in US society that have made it difficult for adults to take additional children into their homes.<sup>90</sup> With the housing shortage and the rising cost of rent and price per square foot for homeowners, fewer people have space in their homes that they might consider available for a child in need of care. With more people working from home during the pandemic, space in a home has become even more sought after. Ahn et al. also argue that the subsidy rate offered to foster parents is too low.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, researchers Baum and associates have raised concerns that negative media stories about poor quality foster care may contribute to the problem.<sup>92</sup> These problems are exacerbated by the fact that effective, evidence-based recruitment strategies have not yet been developed.<sup>93</sup> Riverside County suffers from an overall decline in the foster parent census, just as other counties do.

In addition to the shortage of foster parents in most jurisdictions, only a minority of caregivers in any given community provide care to the majority of children. These "vital few," estimated at about one-fifth of the foster parent pool, care for about three-quarters of foster children.<sup>94</sup> These caregivers are especially important to the child welfare system as the children in these homes experience fewer placement changes, and the care they receive is considered more effective than that provided by most foster parents. In addition, the vital few are especially likely to accept children with special needs, so they are particularly responsive to the population

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<sup>87</sup> John Kelly et al., "The foster care housing crisis." *The Chronicle of Social Change*, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Joseph Ciarrochi et al., "Hope for the Future: Identifying the Individual Difference Characteristics of People Who Are Interested In and Intend To Foster-Care," *The British Journal of Social Work* 42, no. 1 (2012): 7–25.

<sup>89</sup> John Kelly, "Who Cares 2020," *Imprint*, November 10, 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Haksoo Ahn et al., "Estimating minimum adequate foster care costs for children in the United States," *Children and Youth Services Review* 84, (January 2018): 55–67.

<sup>91</sup> Haksoo Ahn et al., "Estimating minimum adequate foster care costs for children in the United States," *Children and Youth Services Review* 84, (January 2018): 55–67.

<sup>92</sup> Angela C. Baum, Sedahlia Jasper Crase, and Kirsten Lee Crase. "Influences on the Decision to Become or Not Become a Foster Parent," *Families in Society* 82, no. 2 (April 2001): 202–13.

<sup>93</sup> Jill D. Berrick, Carole Shauffer, and Jennifer Rodriguez, "Recruiting for excellence in foster care: Marrying child welfare research with brand marketing strategies," *Journal of Public Welfare Child Welfare* 5, no. 2–3 (2011).

<sup>94</sup> Donna J. Cherry and John G. Orme, "The vital few foster parents: Replication and extension," *Children and Youth Services Review* 56, (September 2015).

child welfare agencies serve.<sup>95</sup> Research analyzing how to recruit for caregivers who will become the vital few is currently lacking.

These issues are not unique to Riverside County. Foster parenting can be as challenging as it is rewarding. To be successful, it requires training, recognition, and support. Studies on improving support for foster parents note that parenting is challenging under the best of circumstances. Children in foster care have been through trauma and may feel scared and out of control when they enter a new situation. Due to neglect or abuse, many have not learned coping skills. All of this adds up to an often untenable situation for new foster parents, and one that no amount of altruism can compensate for. Too often, supports for foster parents are afterthoughts in a system already stressed past its limits. Turnover rates of between 30 and 50 percent are not uncommon,<sup>96</sup> and many foster parents quit in their first year due to lack of support, poor communication with caseworkers, insufficient training to address the child's needs, and lack of say in the child's well-being.<sup>97</sup> Some evidence suggests that foster parents do their best for children when they are valued as important partners.

Best practices guides stress the importance of supporting families within the existing system before new recruiting drives are undertaken. A philanthropically funded program in St. Louis Missouri intensively trained, recognized, and supported foster parents. After the first year, 95 percent of the families remained engaged, compared to a baseline of 40 percent.<sup>98</sup> Other foster parent support interventions have proven successful. Based on an in-home coaching model for foster parents, the [KEEP](#) program has been shown to improve the quality and increase the stability of care, and to reduce children's behavioral problems.<sup>99</sup> Notably, the program offers similar, positive impacts for kinship foster parents as well.

Riverside County is attempting to address foster care quality issues through its adoption of the [QPI](#).<sup>100</sup> Started in 2008, QPI is designed to improve the overall quality of care provided to foster

<sup>95</sup> Donna J. Cherry and John G. Orme. "The vital few foster mothers," *Children and Youth Services Review* 35, (January 2013): 1625–1633.

<sup>96</sup> Rachel Whenan, Melissa Oxlad, and Kurt Lushington, "Factors associated with foster carer well-being, satisfaction and intention to continue providing out-of-home care," *Children and Youth Services Review* 31, no. 7. (July 2009): 752–760.

<sup>97</sup> Ryan Hanlon et al., "Systematic Review of Factors Affecting Foster Parent Retention," *Families in Society* 102, no. 3 (July 2021): 285–99.

<sup>98</sup> Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition, "Recruitment Programs Family Finding," Accessed May 23, 2022.

<sup>99</sup> Joseph M. Price et al., "KEEP foster-parent training intervention: model description and effectiveness," *Child & Family Social Work* 14, no. 2 (May 2009): 233–242; Joseph M. Price et al., "Effects of a Foster Parent Training Intervention on Placement Changes of Children in Foster Care," *Child Maltreatment* 13, no. 1 (February 2008): 64–75; Leslie D. Leve et al., "Practitioner review: children in foster care—vulnerabilities and evidence-based interventions that promote resilience processes," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 53, no. 12 (December 2012): 1197–1211; Joseph M. Price et al., "Effects of the KEEP foster parent intervention on child and sibling behavior problems and parental stress during a randomized implementation trial," *Prevention Science* 16, no. 5 (November 2014): 689–685.

<sup>100</sup> Quality Parenting Initiative, "QPI – Quality Parenting Initiative," Accessed June 6, 2022.

children by focusing on developing meaningful relationships to children in care as well as their birth parents. A seasoned staff member is responsible for promulgating the QPI principles and strategies in Riverside County.

## **The Organizational Context of Foster Care: FFAs**

In 1986, the California state legislature allowed the establishment of FFAs to alleviate problems faced by the overburdened foster care system. FFAs are community-based, nonprofit organizations licensed by the state to provide foster family care and adoption services. In the past, FFAs provided a unique service, focusing efforts on hard-to-place children, sibling groups, and children with special needs. They engaged foster parents in significant training hours (above state minimum standards), and provided a high level of support to caregivers and children, typically meeting with families at least once per week. Some FFAs continue to provide specialized services, engaging foster parents as Intensive Services Foster Caregivers (ISFC). These caregivers undergo specialized training to prepare for children with complex care needs. These agencies can also contract with the County's RUHS/BH Care services agencies to provide additional Therapeutic Behavioral Services (TBS) to children. Increasingly, however, many FFAs provide services to all children in care.

Some counties that contract with FFAs only use them for children considered hard to place. Others use them for almost all of their foster and adoptive care needs. Within California, there is a spectrum in the degree to which privatization and use of FFAs has occurred among social services agencies. As of October 2021, about 19 percent of all children in California who were in out-of-home care were in foster homes certified by an FFA.<sup>101</sup>

Riverside County is especially reliant on FFAs. Following the Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) of 2015, Riverside County determined it would be most cost-effective to contract out all of their non-kin foster care services to FFA providers. County officials arrived at this decision after considering the significant increase in workload associated with CCR regulations, coupled with a flat funding allocation from the state. Today, Riverside County contracts with 68 FFAs totaling nearly \$40 million in expenditures in Fiscal Year (FY) 2020–2021.<sup>102</sup> FFAs are responsible for all non-kin out-of-home placements equal to about one-third (31.4%) of all children in out-of-home care. Some FFAs provide STRTP treatment centers in addition to foster care and adoption services.

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<sup>101</sup> Child Welfare Indicators Project, "Point in Time/In Care," Accessed March 31, 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Riverside County Department of Public Social Services, Finance and Forecasting Division Management Reporting Unit, *FFA Expenditures – FY 18–19 – FY 20–21*. (2021).

Managers overseeing foster care in Riverside County indicate that they have worked to prioritize their relationships with FFAs. They indicate that they regularly meet with FFA providers, and that they terminate contracts when quality issues are identified.

## Matching Children with Appropriate Foster Caregivers

As noted previously, relatives are the first to be assessed for their potential to provide care. If a relative or close family friend cannot be identified, CSD staff work with FFAs to identify an appropriate foster care placement. Currently, that process is out-of-date and insufficient for the size and scope of Riverside County's child welfare system. Relying largely on a series of email exchanges with multiple agencies, the process is inefficient, time consuming, and information-poor.

## Strengths

The current Deputy Director overseeing the Placement Division has a long history with CSD and has played several roles working with children and youth. She has a vision for developing a strong continuum of care, including a range of quality placement options for children with varied needs.

The relationship between the FFAs and Riverside County is clearly one of the several bright spots. The FFA Directors we interviewed spoke favorably about their relationship with Riverside County and vice versa. There is a strong sense of community and partnership between the County and FFAs. According to two FFA directors, compared to other counties, Riverside County staff provide high-quality responses in a timely way. This is especially true with regard to changes in policy, guidelines, or general practices. As one FFA Director described it "this is my happy county." This Director went on to explain that the County has a "genuine care for the children."

In addition to the strengths evident at the management level, social workers conveyed their commitment to children in care and their fervent desire to see children placed in highly effective foster homes.

## Opportunities

Managers and social workers are in agreement that the match between a child's needs and a foster parent's capacities is vital to a strong child welfare system. According to one manager:

I want to ensure that we have a good match for our kiddos. If we have a good match, and we can put supportive services in place, then we give that kiddo the best fighting chance from the get-go rather than just

looking for a vacancy. And so that has been kind of one of my mantras, "It's about placement match, not just a bed."

The efforts to identify an appropriate match, however, have not kept pace with the complexity, scope, and size of the Riverside County child welfare system and the number of FFAs with which it works. County officials have re-initiated conversations with a foster care software development company, [Binti](#), to determine if that software platform might suit their needs.<sup>103</sup> Binti is currently in use in dozens of California counties and provides services to multiple states. The software is designed to streamline the foster parent certification process, reduce the time from foster parent inquiry to licensed status, and offer comprehensive information regarding the available foster parent pool—including geographic availability and service capacity—in order to identify potential matches for children's needs. Binti is an extremely effective tool for recruiting, licensing, and supporting foster homes.

Riverside County is challenged, however, as the implementation of Binti would need to occur in each of the FFAs with which they work in order to be maximally effective. In other words, the children needing care come to the attention of CSD, but the service providers who offer care are scattered across the County and have a proprietary relationship with their array of available caregivers. Close collaboration with Binti and the FFAs will be required in order to create a seamless system that all parties can use toward the common goal of identifying and supporting safe and effective placement options for children.

Matching takes time, however, regardless of whether CSD staff rely on new software to streamline foster home identification. Many counties have developed 23-hour assessment centers that provide a comfortable, safe, home-like environment while social workers seek placement alternatives for a given child. Riverside County is working with an FFA provider to establish a transitional shelter care facility that will allow for a three-day stay. Until that contract is established, they are making use of an Airbnb rental property, staffed 24/7. This may be an effective short-term solution, though any model for emergency and short-term care must be sufficiently flexible to respond to unexpected increases in the child census. In the current context of significant staff shortages, it is difficult to see how the County can be sufficiently nimble to respond to such emergent needs. The County should urgently prioritize efforts to expedite the contracting and licensing process for the new transitional shelter care facility to enhance temporary placement resources for children and youth.

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<sup>103</sup> Binti, "Foster Care Software," Accessed June 9, 2022.

## Areas In Need of Improvement

### Too Few Quality Foster Homes

Similar to jurisdictions across the state and the nation, Riverside County suffers from a severe foster parent shortage. Circumstances relating to the pandemic have exacerbated these shortages. Staff indicate that many foster parents are insufficiently prepared to take on the challenges of caregiving, especially considering many children's difficult behavioral health needs. Placement options for older youth and for youth with complex needs are especially scarce.

Findings from our survey of CSD staff suggest that Riverside County has an insufficient number of quality foster homes available to care for children and youth. About half of respondents (51%) indicated that they often or always have safe placements available for children.<sup>104</sup> About one-third (31.6%) indicated that they often or always have stable placements available for children,<sup>105</sup> and 13.2 percent indicated that they often or always have placements that enable siblings to stay together.<sup>106</sup> About one in five respondents (22.2%) indicated that they often or always have placements that meet children's needs (e.g., language, culture, location, etc.).<sup>107</sup>

Because both availability and quality are important to children's well-being, we also asked about the overall quality of non-kin foster caregivers. Though some foster parents provide exceptional care, some do not. When asked to share their "impressions of the quality of services for children in out-of-home care" from very poor quality to very good quality, about half (52.3%) of respondents indicated that "safe" placements were good or very good quality. Two-fifths of respondents indicated that "stable" placements were good or very good quality.

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<sup>104</sup> 40.4 percent indicated that "safe" placements are "sometimes" available.

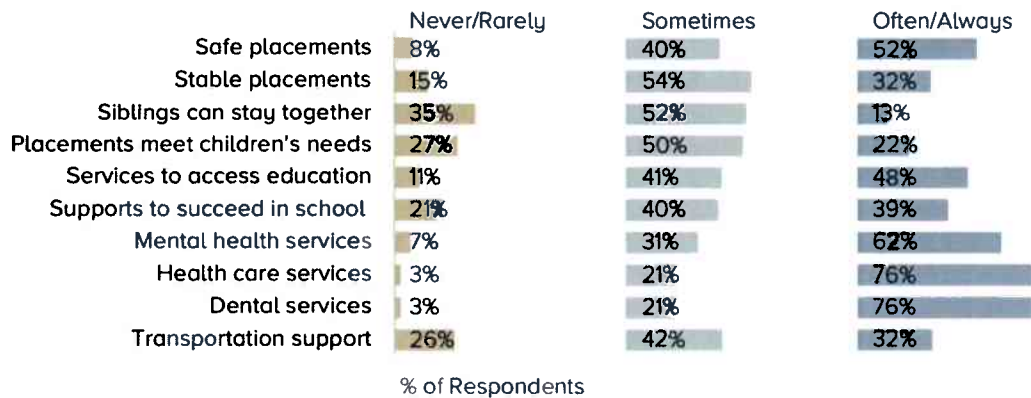
<sup>105</sup> 53.8 percent indicated that "stable" placements are "sometimes" available.

<sup>106</sup> 51.7 percent indicated that "placements that enable siblings to stay together" are "sometimes" available.

<sup>107</sup> 50.4 percent indicated that "placements that meet children's needs (e.g., language, culture, location)" are "sometimes" available.

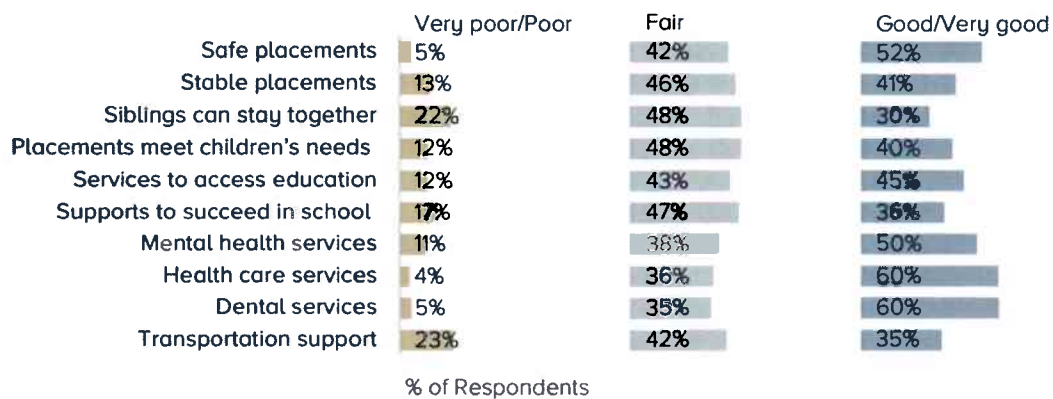
**Figure 9: Availability of Out-of-home Care Placements or Services**

**Q1 Please share your impressions of the availability of the following placements or services to children in out-of-home care. By out-of-home care, we mean kinship care, foster care, and congregate care.**



**Figure 10: Quality of Out-of-home Care Placements or Services**

**Q2 Please share your impressions of the quality of the following placements or services for children in out-of-home care.**



Comments from focus group respondents are illustrative:

- "Often, the only placement option is the first home that says yes. It does not ensure stability or long term placement."
- "Placements for children, other than newborn children, are difficult to find. We are so desperate, we take any placement. It doesn't matter if we split up siblings, if the primary language in the home is different from the child's language, or if they lose

connection to their community and school of origin. We are in such a dilemma we take just about any placement."

- "We do not have enough placements of quantity or quality to care for our children that are coming out of homes of abuse and who have experienced trauma."
- "It is difficult to find quality placements for children with siblings, especially when there are more than two children in the sibling group."

Respondents raised concerns about the trauma children experienced from inadequate placements and frequent placement changes. They said some children are out of school for long periods of time, rarely visit with siblings and birth parents, and cannot access services they should receive.

Resource parents' level of skill and commitment to the children was a concern for numerous respondents. While respondents expressed appreciation for some excellent resource parents, most commenters described deficiencies. Too often, resource parents do not seem prepared to respond skillfully to children's needs. One respondent explained:

The children that are brought into care have experienced trauma, neglect, or some other form of abuse. Somehow, caregivers have an expectation that these children behave well, meaning do not act out, [and] have no verbal or physical aggression. They are surprised when children display symptoms of depression and anxiety. Anyone who receives training to provide care for a foster child should expect these children to not be well adjusted, to be prepared to help them to deal with their trauma, and to expect the children to be upset that they are even in foster care. It may require an additional vetting process with potential placements, but it is needed, to prevent so many 14 day notice of removals, for what should be expected behaviors from a foster child.

Caregivers lack insight of what being a foster parent means and the time necessary to fulfill the needs of these children. A lot of them hold jobs and have limited wiggle room to work with. Additionally, if the children have requests such as maintaining church attendance or participation in sports, this typically has to wait for a court order for the Department to provide assistance with this, because placement caregivers are unwilling to do so. This puts the Department in a bind because we don't have the staff to fulfill these requests.

In our survey of social work staff, we noted with concern the number of comments offered relating to the inadequate number of high quality foster care placements. The gravity of this concern and the attendant consequences for children cannot be stressed more strongly.



Some respondents advised that foster parents should be better trained to use trauma-informed practices. Others emphasized that recruiters should do a better job of conveying what is expected of resource parents. Related issues include inadequate training and support for resource families leading to placement disruptions. Multiple disrupted placements impact not only the children who must move from place to place—and the associated issues of trauma and difficulty in coordinating appropriate mental and physical health care for them—but also the health of Riverside County's child welfare system as a whole.

Some social workers called out the exceptional care that some foster parents provide. As suggested by the comment below, they also noted some of the qualities of strong foster parents:

The availability of placements that will actively partner with birth parents and engage them as supportive mentors, as well as provide quality monitoring for parent/child visits, is very limited. However, for those placements that are available to offer this type of support, the quality is solid and makes a big difference in the lives of the children and birth parents.

Overall, however, the general impression among social workers is that in order to provide quality services to children in Riverside County's child welfare system, more foster parents—and more highly effective foster parents—are needed.

## **Safety of Children in Care**

Against the backdrop of high worker turnover, high caseloads, and at times low-quality placements, keeping children safe while they are in placement is an issue of critical concern. As mentioned previously, maltreatment in foster care is measured as a rate per 100,000 days in care among all children in care in a given year. In 2019, that rate in Riverside County was 9.03 per 100,000 days of care, slightly higher than the statewide rate of 8.44.

In many of our interviews as well as our survey, we asked questions regarding the safety of children in care. Several respondents spoke about the need to interview children away from the placement when investigating maltreatment allegations. In considering maltreatment of children in care, one respondent said,

The [County] workers need to take more time talking to kids to get them to tell the truth about what they are experiencing at their placements. Those drive-by visits once a month aren't enough to create trust with the child. The kids are scared to tell the truth because they get in trouble with their foster parents. Sometimes the kids are scared they will have to leave their placement and the next one will be worse. When they tell

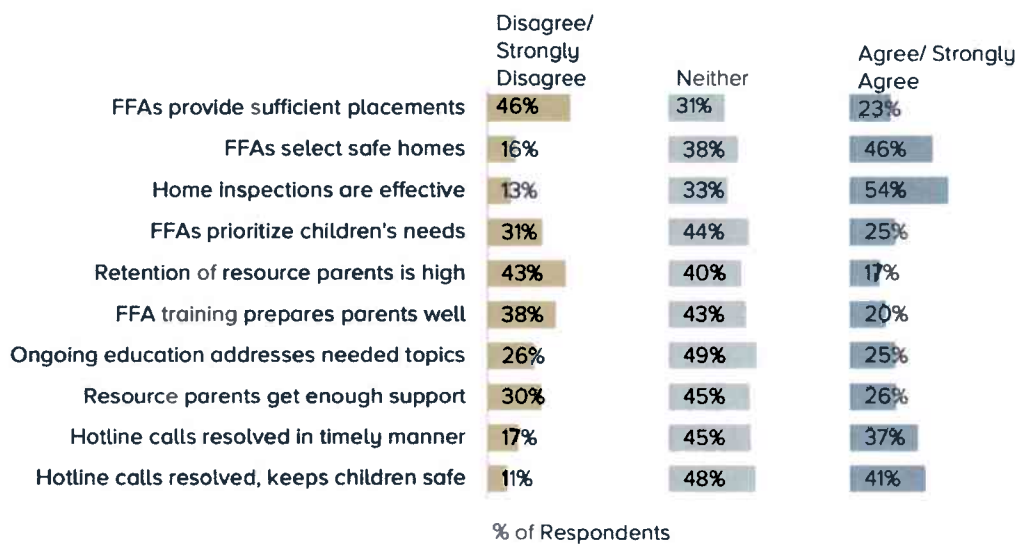
their therapist what is happening, there should be a way that the therapist can report it without the child getting in trouble with the provider. There should be a way that those reports can be confidential.

## FFA Concerns

Our survey asked about the nature of FFA services in support of foster care. Findings in Figure 11 show some perception that they are adequate, but also have room for improvement.

**Figure 11: Foster Family Agency Survey Results**

Q7 Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.



Many respondents spoke about conflicts of interest between FFAs and children in their placements. For example, respondents said that FFAs sometimes have an interest in keeping children in their network and preserving relationships with their placement providers. We heard several reports of FFAs keeping a child in their network even when it appeared to be in the child's best interest to move to a placement outside of it. Relatedly, because FFAs are interested in preserving the future availability of resource parents, they sometimes prioritize the provider's needs above those of the children. For example, in some cases, an FFA may keep children in placements when it might have been in the child's best interests to leave; at other times, an FFA may move children when it might have been in the child's best interests to stay.

We had [a kid who was] blowing out of placements. [He was] crying and hitting and really hard to control. And then he went to this other home and they set boundaries and they connected and he just blossomed. He

did well. He was so happy. I was like, "Dude what happened?" And he was like "I'm just happy." And then [the FFA] moved him out. [The FFA was] like, "Oh this kid is calm now, so we need to move this kid and put another kid in that good home." So then we'd ship calm kids off to less skilled homes. Homes that really shouldn't even be fostering. We put this kid in a less skilled home and now he's wetting the bed again and all those [mal-adaptive] behaviors are back.

From the available data, we cannot determine whether these concerns about FFA providers are frequent and/or whether they refer to a few or to many providers. We recommend that CSD investigate this concern further.

Respondents also described complex dynamics between FFA social workers and County social workers. Although County social workers are ultimately responsible for the children in care, FFA social workers generally visit children one time per week while County social workers are required to visit children only one time per month. According to one observer, sometimes the FFA social worker tries to "run the show" and other times they are deferential to the County worker. The California Core Practice Model emphasizes collaborative planning and team-based decision-making, yet it appears that these practice principles are not always adhered to.

Another area of concern related to the general performance of some FFAs in terms of adequate service provision. Given available data we are unable to determine the scale of this concern. One respondent said:

We are at the mercy of out-of-home care providers for children, and they seem to know this. They rarely will transport a child to court-ordered visits, nor will they supervise court-ordered visits. FFA placements are paid at a high rate to assist with transportation, and they do not assist at the level our Department requires, resulting in our SSP transporting children and supervising visits when their time would be better used investigating child abuse/neglect or providing case management services.

Some respondents felt that FFAs are providing training at a lower standard than what was provided by the County prior to the 2017 transition to FFA care for non-kin placements. For example:

These agencies for the most part do the bare minimum of training for their families (12 hours) and they are not prepared for the challenges that these sorts of children bring. Riverside County used to have a 24-hour training program with experienced trainers who worked in child welfare and knew the system and clientele well.

In general, County leadership indicated that their relationships with FFAs are strong and that they meet regularly to assess and reassess services. Nevertheless, if a provider is offering sub-standard services to children and families, the County places a hold on the provider.

We examined audit summaries that assessed 15 of the 68 FFA providers in Riverside County. Each of the agency summaries reflected different time frames, and we cannot discern how many children's records were examined in each agency, thus making comparisons across agencies difficult. The audits examine a variety of standard agency practices such as timely vision or dental care for children, percentage of clients with clothing inventories documented, percentage of clients not participating in outdoor activities, or percentage of clients aware of their rights (e.g., phone rights, religious rights, rights to maintain contact with friends, etc.). For staff, the summaries examine issues such as the percentage of employees with valid Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) certificates, percentage of staff with documentation of training, or percentage of staff with vehicle insurance. We note that some of the audit items reflect longstanding issues that have plagued many child welfare agencies; the fact that Riverside collects data on these issues and, presumably, follows up with agencies for corrective action is noteworthy. For a review of compliance issues by FFA, see Appendix G.

As mentioned above, we were able to reach only two FFA Directors to identify their perspectives. The two FFA Directors we spoke with identified the following areas of concern:

1. When new foster homes are being certified, the County's secondary review slows the overall process. Given the urgent need for new foster homes, these delays should be avoided.
2. Short-notice placement decisions require immediate cooperation, and at times there are communication lags with the County.
3. When the County has a placement need, they send an email to all the FFAs. It can be difficult to determine whether another provider has met the need or whether the need is outstanding. When these requests come in the middle of the night, the FFAs are unable to be as responsive as they are to phone calls.

## Recommendations

### County/FFA Collaboration

1. **Appoint an ombudsperson or other neutral party to process feedback about FFA/County partnerships.** Critically assess whether the County needs more than one position, and what entity should sponsor this position to ensure neutrality. Possible

entities that could house this position include CASA, the Juvenile Court, appointed counsel, the County, or a local university.

The County made the decision to outsource all non-kin foster parenting to FFAs for fiscally sound reasons. This approach creates a need for enhanced communication strategies between FFA foster parents, social workers, and managers with County staff, and vice versa. FFA and County staff should have one or more point person(s) who can mediate concerns and provide oversight. These might include issues ranging from unreturned phone calls, insufficient documentation or information sharing to more serious concerns such as placement quality issues, review of out-of-home investigations (OHI), and critical incident reviews in collaboration with the CQI unit.

2. **Increase County oversight of FFAs.** CSD must be able to trust their FFA partners, but they also must verify the quality of their work. We recommend this guiding principle for CSD staff working closely with FFAs: trust, but verify. Below, we list possible mechanisms for increased oversight. The County should carefully consider these mechanisms in collaboration with a neutral party such as the ombudsperson suggested above, or a workgroup including non-CSD and non-FFA affiliated professionals until such a position is developed.
  - a. Develop and publicize a link and Quick Response Code (better known as QR code) for a confidential, continually-open feedback platform (such as an anonymized Google form) monitored by the ombudsperson described above. This will allow FFA staff, clients, and caregivers to immediately report concerns.
  - b. On an annual basis, conduct a random sample of in-depth interviews with young people upon their exit from foster homes to identify strengths, risks, and opportunities. Consider partnering with a local university to identify graduate students in fields such as social work and psychology to conduct voluntary exit interviews to identify areas of concern.
  - c. Upon locating youth who absconded from placements, conduct in-depth interviews to identify potential placement risks that led to the children and youth running away.
  - d. Require FFAs to give County social workers continuous access to FFA social worker notes, visit logs, and service logs. In the near term, FFAs can create user accounts for County staff that provide full file access just as they do for their own staff. In the long term, the County can adopt a software platform for all FFAs that the County can also interface with. This functionality should be incorporated into the future contract for placement software with a provider such as Binti.
  - e. Embed County workers or unaffiliated professional parents in each FFA to provide support and to identify areas of concern to the ombudsperson.

- f. Utilize safety and placement data collected in CWS/CMS to analyze performance of each FFA. The CQI unit could oversee this effort and closely collaborate with the Contracts Unit when issues arise requiring contract modifications. All critical incident reviews involving FFAs should include a neutral party, such as the ombudsperson, whose funding is not dependent on the County or FFAs. All parties must embrace a principle of full transparency and willingness to critically evaluate areas in need of improvement. Collaborate with a contractor such as Implematics to develop protocols for critical review involving the County and FFAs when one or more critical incidents occur with the same FFA.
- g. Consider whether additional safety protocols are needed upon reviewing lessons learned from prior critical incidents. Review lessons learned with key stakeholders involved in the case. Increase collaboration with law enforcement in critical incident review. Increase County-sponsored mandatory training for FFA staff and caregivers on issues of concern arising after audits and critical incidents.
- h. Conduct in-depth audits of several FFAs per year at random, irrespective of critical incidents, and announce this practice in advance to the FFAs. Include interviews with stakeholders such as CASAs, FFA social workers and support staff, CSD social workers, appointed counsel, and law enforcement. Develop a contract to conduct additional forensic interviews with children and young people if needed.

## Increasing High-quality Placements

1. **Launch a county-wide effort to substantially increase the number of available highly effective foster homes for children.** When kin are not available to care for children, foster parents are the backbone of the out-of-home care system. While efforts continue to develop effective prevention strategies that mitigate the need for foster care, some children will still need care. Those children deserve safe, loving homes with caregivers who can provide trauma-informed care. Foster parent recruitment must be a county-wide endeavor, and will require considerable dedicated resources. Partnerships with FFAs, County agency partners, community-based agencies, the faith community, and schools will be required. The media can and should also be a critical ally.

Efforts to include community members in caring for children can be a first step toward increasing the census of foster parents. Information about ways the community can help should be easily accessible and regularly communicated. For some, the first step to becoming a foster parent is by contributing with gifts and talents in other ways. A mechanism to follow up with community volunteers and encourage their involvement as foster parents is critical. One example from a Kansas child welfare agency may be

instructive.<sup>108</sup> We recommend that the County should study and implement additional [strategies](#) for finding and keeping traditional and therapeutic resource families.<sup>109</sup>

2. **Launch several neighborhood-specific pilots in partnership with selected FFAs to increase the census of foster parents.** Any new model should be evaluated to determine its suitability for replication and expansion, but New Jersey DCF's [Resource Family Model](#) offers possibilities. They use "Resource Family Support Units" (RFSUs) installed at each local area office. RFSUs focus on "recruiting, training, and supporting resource families in neighborhoods from which children enter care, and to ensure prompt placement in homes that meet the needs of each child. These units include at least three support workers, a trainer, placement facilitator, recruiter, and supervisor. This structure allows for all recruitment, training, and ongoing support to be delivered at the local level."<sup>110</sup>
3. **Develop targeted, intensive efforts to improve the quality of care provided by kin and non-kin foster parents.** CSD may wish to collaborate with a selected FFA to pilot intensive support services for resource parents in a geographic area with a high removal rate. Efforts might include QPI implementation, wraparound services, regular parent training opportunities, and parent support groups.
4. **Implement KEEP training for all Resource Parents.** Requiring FFA providers to train foster parents with evidence-based coaching models can increase the quality of children's care and the retention of strong foster parents. [KEEP](#) is one of several options recommended by Casey Family Foundation.<sup>111</sup> CSD can procure the KEEP training services, giving access to all FFAs as part of their contracts.
5. **Fully implement and elevate Riverside County's QPI model.** By contracting out all non-kin foster care to FFA providers, Riverside County has lost the capacity to be in regular contact with non-kin foster parents. It is not at all clear at this time whether its QPI is having appreciable impacts on the quality of foster care. The QPI model cannot be effective if all foster parents who can benefit from the training cannot access it. The County must develop the capacity to deepen its FFA partnerships so that efforts to improve foster care quality can occur on a county-wide basis. CSD should consider the QPI as a next major area of focus for the CQI initiative. Alternatively, it should consider focusing QPI staffing time only on kinship caregivers; FFA providers may wish to develop

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<sup>108</sup> KVC Health Systems, "7 Ways You Can Help A Child in Foster Care (Without Being A Foster Parent)," February 26, 2021.

<sup>109</sup> Casey Family Programs, "Traditional and therapeutic resource families."

<sup>110</sup> Casey Family Programs, "How have some child protection agencies successfully recruited and retained resource families?" December 2020.

<sup>111</sup> KEEP, "Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained," Accessed June 5, 2022.

QPI or, as suggested previously, other evidence-based strategies (e.g., KEEP) to improve caregiving.

6. **Develop a Foster Parent Retention Plan, with a focus on retaining highly effective resource parents.** A growing body of literature recounts the principal reasons foster parents are not retained. Central among these are: insufficient financial support, lack of childcare for working foster parents, lack of support from child welfare professionals, insufficient information about children's needs, and inadequate engagement of foster parents as members of the professional team.<sup>112</sup> Because CSD contracts non-kin foster care out to FFA providers, it can only directly control some of these (e.g., always including foster parents in CFTMs, etc.). CSD leadership should create a workgroup of selected FFA providers and relevant community partners (e.g., Head Start or Early Head Start) to develop a plan to effectively address the retention issue. The Casey Family Foundation model may offer an important starting point: [Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention Plan Brevard 2021](#).<sup>113</sup>
7. **Consider providing additional financial support to resource families to improve retention.** Though common myths about foster care suggest foster parents "do it for the money," most of the evidence suggests otherwise, and thoughtful screening of caregivers prior to certification should keep this problem in check. Even the most effective foster parents, however, indicate that the subsidy they receive to care for the child is insufficient for the need, and most foster parents spend a considerable amount of their own income to care for foster children.<sup>114</sup> Combined with responsive support, increasing the subsidy can be an effective retention strategy. One rigorous study found that approximately \$70/month additional financial support was related to an important increase in retention. Increased financial subsidies combined with additional training increased retention further still.<sup>115</sup>
8. **Create a short-term receiving home for children awaiting placement.** Stated simply by one respondent, "Riverside County needs an emergency shelter to avoid the need for children to sleep and be housed in DPSS offices awaiting placement." Directors, supervisors, and social workers shared stories of children who were awaiting placement sleeping on cots in offices. An obvious downside to this recommendation is that children sometimes stay there for too long, so strict time limits should be instituted. A receiving center could free up placement workers to identify kin placements as well as those that

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<sup>112</sup> For a review, see: Ryan Hanlon et al., "Systematic Review of Factors Affecting Foster Parent Retention," *Families in Society* 102, no. 3 (July 2021): 285-99.

<sup>113</sup> Brevard Family Partnership, *Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention Plan*, (2020).

<sup>114</sup> Ahn et al., "Estimating minimum adequate foster care costs."

<sup>115</sup> Casey Family Programs, "What are some strategies for finding and keeping traditional and therapeutic resource families?" February 9, 2021.



best meet the child's needs. In addition, on-site mental health services and pediatrician assessment offices could help meet multiple needs at a single point of entry. We understand efforts are underway to develop such a transitional site. Efforts to expedite these efforts are warranted.

## Workforce Culture to Increase Support for Resource Parents

1. **Standardize professional norms.** Multiple external partners shared that it was difficult to get caseworkers to return phone calls and emails. Partners understood that this was due to staffing deficits. Regardless, when basic communication breaks down, partnerships break down. This creates a domino effect of critical partners dropping out—resource parents chief among them. Nationally, resource families indicated the biggest barrier on the road to becoming a foster or adoptive parent was agencies not returning their phone calls or emails (36%).<sup>116</sup> A similar study conducted in California counties contained the same findings.<sup>117</sup> We recommend the following minimum professional standards:
  - a. **Phone:** All employees should have a voicemail requesting the caller leave a call back number and a promise to return the call within 24 hours or one business day.
  - b. **Email:** Auto-response messages should be standardized and implemented regularly. They should be generated for workers who are no longer with the agency, providing the name of the supervisor or the replacement worker. They should also provide commonly needed phone numbers, websites, and email addresses.

Written policies concerning phone and email etiquette should be distributed to all staff, regularly reinforced, and modeled by leadership. It should not be the norm that voicemail boxes are full with outdated greetings referencing holidays and lockdowns long past.

2. **Institute feedback mechanisms.** The Department should institute feedback mechanisms so that clients and partners can share suggestions for CSD and caseworker improvement, seeking their input about how the process can be improved and giving them the opportunity to describe any challenges they are experiencing. An innovative way of accomplishing this could be to add a QR code to every email signature. The QR code can bring scanners to customer feedback surveys as well as additional commonly

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<sup>116</sup> AdoptUSKids, "Using data to improve the inquiry-to-licensing experience for families," October 7, 2020.

<sup>117</sup> Erika Weissinger, "Reasons for Attrition Among Public Adoption Seekers," PhD Diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2013).

asked questions. Customer feedback provided through QR codes can create baseline customer satisfaction levels the Department can then improve upon. Feedback can be directed to the Ombudsperson (noted above) or to staff in the CQI unit. The individual or unit that collects feedback should have a direct report to the CSD Director.

## Placements for Special Populations

### Context

Increasingly, the field of child welfare is recognizing that the large majority of children served in out-of-home care constitute a "special population." Medically fragile infants who have extreme levels of specialized health care needs, children and youth with complex behavioral health care needs, adolescents and TAY who are preparing for the independence of adulthood, commercially sex-trafficked minors, and large sibling groups are just some of the children and youth with special needs. In this section, we focus specifically on children and youth with complex behavioral health needs and on TAY.

### Children and Youth with Complex Behavioral Health Needs

Youth in out-of-home care typically exhibit very high rates of internalizing and externalizing mental health concerns relating to the trauma they experienced in their home of origin—problems that often follow them well into adulthood.<sup>118</sup> It is challenging to identify appropriate placement settings that offer these youth safety from themselves (i.e., management of self-harming behaviors) and from others (i.e., safety from the behaviors of other youth who may be struggling with other-harming behaviors), stability of care, and rehabilitative care. Some youth need intensive therapeutic environments that traditionally-supported foster parents may be unable to offer. In addition to the paucity of home-based placement resources that may be available, the field of child welfare holds to the principle of family-based care and thus group care (sometimes referred to as congregate care, residential treatment, or institutional care) is never preferred.

As stated previously, both state and federal law strongly discourage the use of congregate care for children and youth, and therefore, these placement settings are becoming increasingly scarce. Notably, in the past, state law allowed counties to place children or youth charged with crimes in out-of-state congregate care settings. In 2021, however, the state banned out-of-

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<sup>118</sup> Shanta R. Dube et al., "Childhood abuse, household dysfunction, and the risk of attempted suicide throughout the life span: findings from the adverse childhood experiences study." *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 286, no. 24 (December 2001): 3089–3096.

state placements for children or youth charged with crimes.<sup>119</sup> As a result, over 100 youth were returned to California, and about a dozen (n=13) were returned to Riverside County. County staff indicate that placement for youth with complex needs has been especially challenging. Although the state developed a new type of placement setting, referred to as a STRTP, that can provide specialized and intensive services to high-needs youth, County staff have determined that STRTP providers are sometimes unwilling to take children into care. A limited number of provider agencies offer no-reject/no-eject policies, but the large majority of STRTP providers do not.

In addition to these system challenges, youth are increasingly engaged as joint decision makers in determining where or with whom they are willing to stay. Youth typically participate in CFTMs and additionally make their wishes known to their social worker and to their court-appointed counsel. Although there are no formal laws giving youth ultimate decisional authority, youth increasingly demonstrate their views "with their feet." Runaway behavior is not uncommon, and although foster parents and group home staff may do their utmost to retain youth, California does not currently allow child welfare-supervised locked facilities for children in out-of-home care, tacitly allowing runaway behavior when it cannot be fully deterred. These issues combine to make for an extremely complex placement environment for high-needs children and youth and many counties—including Riverside—have few viable tools to address their needs.

## Transition-Age Youth

The term TAY encompasses youth ages 16–24. Within this range, those 16–18 in foster care are referred to as "dependents," and young people ages 18–21 who voluntarily remain in care are NMDs. Those older than 21 are considered young adults that the child welfare agency no longer serves.

TAY in foster care are a unique group. Typically, they enter care as adolescents and are less likely than children of other age groups to reunify with their birth families.<sup>120</sup> They are less likely to enter care because of neglect, and more likely to enter for other reasons, including reasons associated with their own behavioral challenges (38% nationwide), physical abuse (11%), sexual abuse (7%), or their own substance abuse (5%).<sup>121</sup> These youth need a variety of services and supports to help them prepare for the independence of adulthood.

Studies of TAY who exit care suggest that early independence is difficult. In the largest study to date, researchers examined transitions to adulthood in the areas of housing, education,

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<sup>119</sup> Joaquin Palomino and Sara Tiano, "Newsom bans sending foster youth to faraway treatment programs after Chronicle abuse investigation," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 19, 2021.

<sup>120</sup> Fred Wulczyn, Florie Schmits, and Scott Huhr, *Reentry to Foster Care: Identifying Candidates Under The Family First Act*. (Chicago: The Center for State Child Welfare Data, October, 2019).

<sup>121</sup> Garrett Fryar, Elizabeth Jordan, and Kerry Devooght, *Supporting young people transitioning from foster care: Findings from a national survey*. (Washington D.C.: Child Trends, November, 2017).

employment, parenting, and criminal justice involvement.<sup>122</sup> Findings suggest at least four distinct group profiles, each experiencing some important life challenges.

The largest group—about one third of young adults—were living on their own in relatively stable circumstances. Most had earned a high school degree, about half had attended some college, and they were likely to be employed. The majority were female, and they were relatively unlikely to have had contact with the criminal justice system. Although these are largely positive indicators of well-being, this group also experienced considerable challenges. Almost one third had experienced homelessness or “couch-surfing,” over one third had relied on food stamps by age 24, and almost one in five reported symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

On the other end of the spectrum is a group—roughly one in five former foster youth—described as “troubled and troubling.” By age 24, the large majority had experienced incarceration, institutionalization, or homelessness. Nearly half had not completed high school, and were relatively unlikely to be employed. Many had become parents, most were male, and the majority were not living with their children.

These concerning statistics accentuate the importance of high-quality, trauma-informed, treatment-oriented foster care. Also important are significant preparation for independence and collaborative service delivery between systems in order to address youths’ multiple needs.

Youth transitioning from dependency to NMD status face a number of challenges. That is, the complex service system landscape available to children and youth ages 0–18 is entirely different from the one—also exceedingly complex—for adults over age 18.

Transitions to adulthood may require a change in the following ways:

1. **Housing.** This becomes an issue if a foster parent no longer wishes to maintain the placement or the minor wishes to move to a more independent setting.
2. **Therapy.** Many therapists who specialize in serving children and youth do not serve adults or are not connected to the adult mental health system for reimbursement.
3. **Health care.** Many pediatricians do not serve adults.
4. **Personal documents.** Many NMDs preparing for adulthood need to obtain personal documents that young adults in the general population may take for granted, but that may not be readily available to foster youth. For example, in order to apply for a job, to apply for college financial aid, or to sign a rental agreement, young adults may require a social security number, a driver’s license or California state ID, a passport, or a green

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<sup>122</sup> Mark E. Courtney, Jennifer L. Hook, and JoAnn S. Lee, *Distinct subgroups of former foster youth during young adulthood: Implications for policy and practice*. (Chicago: Chapin Hall, March 2010).

card. All of these documentation issues must be addressed prior to the youth's exit from care.

The Department's Youth and Community Resources Region specializes in serving 16–21 year-olds. Typically, the focus is preparing them for independence since reunification is less common for this age group. As authorized by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, TAY may choose to participate in an Independent Living Plan (ILP). Riverside County contracts with an external party for this service and the current provider—the Oak Grove Center—offers a variety of supports to help prepare young people for independence. Transitional housing providers also offer an array of these types of services. What is offered varies by provider.

Figure 12 below is a summary of the current number of TAY in care in Riverside County and key services available to them. Although it shows services available for different age groups, not all teens are participating in all available services.

**Figure 12: Riverside County Service Offerings for TAY**

Youth Age	Count	Services and Supports
16–17	345	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mental health services</li> <li>2. Independent Living Program (THRIVE ILP)               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Mentoring and life coaching</li> <li>b. Workshops on life skills</li> <li>c. Employment assistance and incentives for continuous employment</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Project Graduate provides mentors and incentives for 11th and 12th graders who are struggling in school</li> <li>4. Laptops (college bound), gift cards, gift baskets for graduates</li> </ol>
18–21	403	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mental health services</li> <li>2. THRIVE ILP (see above)</li> <li>3. Job readiness training and support</li> <li>4. Money management training</li> <li>5. Help in pursuing college or other post-secondary training</li> <li>6. Crisis intervention and support</li> </ol>

CSD has a continuum of placement types for transitioning youth to meet different types of needs. In 2019, approximately 400 youth ages 18–21 who opted into NMD status were living in a range of placement settings (See Figure 13 below).