



COUNTY OF YOLO

Health and Human Services Agency

Nolan Sullivan
HHSA Director

Tony Kildare, LCSW
Director, Child, Youth & Family Branch

MAILING ADDRESS
137 N. Cottonwood Street • Woodland, CA 95695
(530) 661-2945 • www.yolocounty.org

September 12, 2023

The Honorable Daniel M. Wolk
1000 Main Street
Woodland, CA, 95695

Yolo County Grand Jury Foreperson
PO Box 2142
Woodland, CA 95776

Honorable Judge Wolk and Grand Jury Foreperson,

On June 27, 2023, the Yolo County Grand Jury submitted its report, *Keeping Families Together; Strengthening a Struggling Child Welfare Service*, which contained eight (8) Findings and six (6) recommendations. The Yolo County Department of Health and Human Services has reviewed the Report of the Grand Jury and has prepared an official response (pursuant to Penal Code §933.05):

FINDINGS

Finding F-1: Child Welfare Services is facing an acute shortage of social workers, hampering the delivery of needed services to Yolo County's children and families. This is an ongoing problem dating back at least eight years.

Response: We partially disagree with this Finding. While the Agency has experienced significant challenges with recruitment, hiring, and retention over the past four years, the reduction in workforce has been accompanied by a dramatic decrease in the number of cases for which the Agency is responsible. Between March 2020 and June 2023, total child welfare cases in Yolo County have decreased by 45.7% (658 to 357), and the number of children in foster care decreased 42.8% (478 to 273). Over the past few months, we have onboarded twelve (12) child welfare staff that include two (2) Child Welfare Workers, nine (9) Social Worker Practitioners, and one (1) Social Worker Supervisor. Four days prior to the release of the Grand Jury's report (June 23, 2023), an analysis was conducted and determined the median (18), mean (17.8) and range (5-25) of caseloads in the Family Maintenance, Family Reunification, and Permanent Planning programs.

Davis

600 A Street
Davis, CA 95616
Mental Health (530) 757-5530

West Sacramento

500 Jefferson Boulevard
West Sacramento, CA 95605
Service Center (916) 375-6200
Mental Health (916) 375-6350
Public Health (916) 375-6380

Winters

111 East Grant Avenue
Winters, CA 95694
Service Center (530) 406-4444

Woodland

25 & 137 N. Cottonwood Street
Woodland, CA 95695
Service Center (530) 661-2750
Mental Health (530) 666-8630
Public Health (530) 666-8645

Finding F-2: Child Welfare Services lacks sufficient staffing to allow for quality training and reasonable caseloads.

Response: We partially disagree with this Finding. There is no argument that staffing over the past four years, at times, had reached critical levels that resulted in increased caseloads and a prioritization of the most essential needs of children and families. The impact of the global pandemic during this timeframe cannot be overstated, as Yolo County – like many social service organizations across the state and country – experienced significant turnover. Presently, the confluence of reduced caseloads, increased staffing, and the development of a training unit led by a training supervisor (that serves the entire child welfare services agency) has created an opportunity for the agency to address these concerns.

Finding F-3: The excessive staff turnover at all levels of Child Welfare Services, compounded by employee burnout, perpetuates the staffing crisis and negatively impacts children and families.

Response: We partially disagree with this Finding. As stated in the response to Findings F-1 and F-2, there can be no doubt that there was significant turnover at all levels over the past four years that resulted in a staffing crisis. However, we believe that despite incredible challenges our staff were able to keep children and families safe in unprecedented circumstances. We also believe that we do not have an active staffing “crisis,” as we have made substantial improvements to staffing levels (as discussed in the response to Finding F-1). Over the last several years the agency has implemented and is in the process of implementing several major changes around salary and benefits, recruitment, new employee onboarding, staff training, and leadership training.

Finding F-4: Employee morale, though improving, continues to be wanting, compromising recruitment and retention.

Response: We partially disagree with this Finding. We do believe that employee morale has been an issue but is improving. We have had recent successes with recruitment and retention that suggest that the staffing “crisis” has been resolved and we are beginning to stabilize. We are confident that if the efforts in the above questions are continued and prioritized by management, we’ll continue to see gains in morale, recruitment, and retention.

Finding F-5: Despite the critical need for additional social workers, professional resources dedicated to recruitment are lacking.

Response: We partially disagree with this Finding. We acknowledge that professional resources in the form of recruiters may have been helpful during the staffing “crisis,” and could be of benefit in the future. We also acknowledge that county and department human resource recruiting tools and resources could be helpful. We struggle to use modern recruitment posting methods, recruiting staff at the intern and college graduate level, and finding creative ways to create talent pipelines for our social working staff in an ever more competitive hiring environment.

We believe that we have experienced some success using informal methods (that included having child welfare leadership actively contact social worker programs of regional universities to make direct contact with current and graduating student classes), and again will note that there is no longer a “critical need for additional social workers.” We also continue to work with our partners in both department and county HR to enhance recruiting tools and resources.

Finding F-6: Black children in Yolo County have a continuing history of entering foster care at higher rates than other ethnic and racial groups, which is potentially avoidable.

Response: We agree with this Finding. The fact that Black children have historically been overrepresented in Yolo County’s child welfare system cannot be disputed. In calendar year 2012, the odds of Black children in Yolo County entering foster care were almost double that for White children. Over the next ten years, this rate increased dramatically, culminating in 2021, where Black children in Yolo County were *16.54 times more likely* than White children to enter foster care.¹ Yolo County recognizes that this is a social justice issue and is committed to providing prevention and early intervention through an Alternative Response (AR) program that targets Black children ages 0-5 in Yolo County, as this demographic has been identified as being the most likely to enter foster care in Yolo County. The AR program was identified in Yolo County’s most recent System Improvement Plan (SIP)² and will be a collaboration between Yolo County Child Welfare Services, Yolo County First Five, and Yolo County Children’s Alliance to provide preventative services using evidence-

¹ This data can be reviewed at the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at: <https://ccwip.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/reports/DisparityIndices/STSG/r/rts/>

² More information about California County System Improvement Plans can be located at: <https://cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/child-welfare-program-improvement/child-and-family-services-review/system-improvement-plans>

based interventions that have been demonstrated to have increased success with Black families.³

Finding F-7: Yolo County has a long-term, crucial shortage of foster families, especially for Black and Latino children. As a result, children are placed out-of-county, disrupting their school and community relationships, and making family visitation more difficult. Additionally, out-of-county placements are more time consuming for social workers, adding to their already over-burdened workload.

Response: We agree with this Finding. Yolo County recognizes that this is a significant problem and has identified the recruitment of foster families in Yolo County as a priority in the most recent System Improvement Plan (SIP). The County has contracted with an organization with specific expertise in recruiting foster parents, Raise A Child, and is actively making efforts to address the shortage of local foster homes. It should be noted that, as of August 1, 2023, approximately 75% (175/235) of Yolo County foster children⁴ are placed in Yolo or the nearby counties of Sacramento, Solano, Colusa, Sutter, Yuba, and Butte.

Finding F-8: Community resources for child abuse prevention and intervention services essential to family preservation are inadequate, especially for a racially and culturally diverse client base.

Response: We partially disagree with this Finding. While the county has many resources to address child abuse prevention and intervention services there is always room for improvement, particularly in providing services that are racially and culturally tailored to meet the needs of marginalized children and families in our community. This is a key priority for the agency to address and while the agency doesn't directly control what resources are and are not in the community it is an area of active focus.

³ While the Alternative Response program will provide preventative services to any family that meets criteria under the Families First Prevention Services Act – regardless of demographic – the specific evidence-based practices were selected because they have demonstrated success with Black families. The rationale for this decision is discussed in Yolo County's Comprehensive Prevention Plan (CPP) document that is currently being reviewed by the State and will be available for review upon approval.

⁴ Please refer to the most recent Yolo County CWS Data Snapshot; this figure does not include children in guardianships or nonminor dependents.

Recommendations

Recommendation R-1: Yolo County Health and Social Services Agency should develop a plan by December 31, 2023, to provide CWS a rapid infusion of temporary or permanent professional staff to reduce caseload to within 80% of best practice as defined by CWS leadership.

Response: We partially disagree. While we appreciate the suggestion to add additional staff and we can always use more resources, staffing is close to stabilized and in some programs, we are above caseload standards. Four days prior to the release of the Grand Jury's report (June 23, 2023), an analysis was conducted and determined the median (18), mean (17.8) and range (5-25) of caseloads in the Family Maintenance, Family Reunification, and Permanent Planning programs. As we continue to make progress on recruitment, retention and stabilizing the work environment we are very close to meeting this recommendation already.

Recommendation R-2: Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency should identify and adopt administrative support tools, such as dictation and outside transcription services, and add clerical staff to reduce workload on social workers by December 31, 2023.

Response: We agree. While we have some supports in place already, freeing up social workers to do social work is imperative in keeping children safe. As we continue to work on the Child Welfare team, providing clerical, analytical and program support to social workers will be a top priority and we'll continue to add and recruit for support positions within what the county budget will allow. Unfortunately, we have some of the same vacancy issues in some of these roles but continue to look for innovative ways to fill all gaps.

Recommendation R-3: Yolo County Board of Supervisors should, subject to collective bargaining, adopt a compensation and benefit structure for all social worker classifications that is competitive in the regional market by July 1, 2024.

Response: We partially agree. The county has recently moved its compensation model to 100% of area compensation average. In January 2023 several HHSA classifications, including some in CWS and social workers received increases due to this compensation methodology change. HHSA is also working on a standalone Child Welfare Social Worker series which will include enhanced salaries for purposes of adequate compensation, recruitment and retention. We

believe, in some part salaries have contributed to some vacancy issues. There is also a shortage of social workers across the State of California. This work should be completed by July of 2024.

Benefit structure is a little more difficult to implement from the department alone and will have to be addressed through the collective bargaining process with the county negotiating team and various bargaining units as contracts come up for renewal.

Recommendation R-4: Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency should establish a fully operational Practitioner Training Unit within Child Welfare Services by July 1, 2024.

Response: We agree. This recommendation has already been implemented.

Recommendation R-5: Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency should initiate implementation of the Alternate Response Program by December 31, 2023.

Response: We agree. The County has already selected providers to implement the Alternative Response program and are in the end stages of contract development. The program will be operational before December 31, 2023.

Recommendation R-6: Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency should contract with an outside expert in recruitment, retention, and support of culturally diverse foster families by December 31, 2023, to assist with increasing the proportion of in-county foster placements.

Response: We agree, and this recommendation has already been implemented. The County has contracted with an organization with specific expertise in recruiting foster parents, Raise A Child, and is actively making efforts to address the shortage of local foster homes.