



Positive Outcomes for All:

*Using An Institutional Analysis to Identify and Address
African American Children's Low Reunification Rates
and Long-Term Stays in Fresno County's
Foster Care System*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nationally, significantly greater proportions of African American children enter and remain in foster care than children of other races. Forty-six states have disproportionate representations of African American children in their child welfare systems. In seven states, including California, the proportion of African American children in foster care is considered “extreme.” That means the number of African American children involved in the child welfare system is four times their percentage of the child population in those states.¹ This overrepresentation is known as disproportionality.

African American children and their families are more likely to be reported to child protection agencies for maltreatment and have investigations of abuse and neglect opened.² Once involved with the child welfare system, African American children are more likely to be removed from their homes and spend longer periods of time in foster care. Often, their families have less access to helpful social services. These trends clearly illustrate racial disparity and inequity for African American children and their families.

In Fresno County, like many other places, African American families have been disproportionately represented in the child welfare system for decades. In 2000, black families comprised five to six percent of the county’s general population while nearly a quarter of youth in care were black.³ Fresno worked to rectify this problem, and by 2009, black youth comprised 17 percent of youth in care.

Despite that progress, agency leaders still were concerned by the slow reunification of black children with their parents and their long stays in foster care. As part of efforts to address these concerns, in 2006, Fresno County Department of Social Services (DSS)⁴ reached out to the broader community and asked for assistance. The Department publicly committed to understanding the root causes of these inequities and to working in partnership with the community to find solutions.

In 2009, Fresno County DSS volunteered to participate in a study known as the Institutional Analysis, which seeks to understand and address organizational and structural contributors to poor outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare, juvenile justice and other systems. Fresno County DSS agreed to this study because it believed the efforts to improve outcomes for African American families would, in turn, benefit *all* families it served. Fresno County DSS welcomed the recommendations from the Institutional Analysis to continue to advance its efforts to reduce inequities for children and families involved in the child welfare system.

Fresno County is not alone in its willingness to tackle the difficult issue of racial disparity. CSSP also has worked with two counties in Michigan and Fairfax County in Virginia on similar Institutional Analysis studies and continues to collect and analyze data about the experiences of African American families and the way child welfare systems work with them.

Fresno County DSS already has made efforts to remedy many of the findings identified in the Institutional Analysis and has outlined a clear action plan, which is included at the end of this report. CSSP will continue to work with Fresno County as it improves outcomes for children.

Findings

The Institutional Analysis in Fresno focused on two questions:

- 1. What organizational factors contribute to the fact that African American children, who have been removed from their parents due to abuse or neglect, experience low reunification rates with their parents?*
- 2. How are the needs for stability and nurturance being addressed for African American youth who are not reunified with their parents?*

Overall, the Institutional Analysis found a gap between the county’s intent to move African American children out of foster care to their biological families or other permanent options and the actual outcomes experienced by these children and families. A broad theme identified in this study was that, through its policies and practice, Fresno County DSS did not act with a sense of urgency to safely return African American children to their families or to find other safe, permanent and loving options. Fresno County DSS did not understand the unique strengths and problems faced by African American families. Many African American families entered the child welfare system with complex challenges in their lives. Some of their problems were economic—poverty, homelessness and unemployment—while others included child maltreatment, domestic violence, mental illness and substance abuse. The Institutional Analysis found that Fresno County DSS intervened with a family through universal, rather than individualized, assessments and service plans. For example, assessments focused exclusively on substance abuse, mental health or domestic violence issues rather than comprehensively looking at a family’s specific needs and assets.

Service plans for families routinely consisted of parenting classes, drug testing, domestic violence classes, individual therapy and supervised visitation with little connection to the needs identified in assessments and case notes. These services tended to be centrally located in Fresno rather than in the communities where African American parents lived, and the operating hours of service providers were inconvenient for working parents. Further, there is minimal evidence that Fresno County DSS helped support parents in achieving economic stability by linking them with other available services, such as housing programs and benefits for teen parents.

The study also found that the child welfare system was not organized in a way that supported youth in finding permanent, nurturing connections. Specifically, Fresno County DSS does not direct workers to proactively and consistently find permanent families for older youth. As a result, youth over the age of 10 were uniformly considered by workers to be unadoptable.

Recommendations

CSSP offers the following recommendations to support the safe and timely reunification of African American families and promote permanent family connections for older African American youth in foster care in Fresno County.

1. Expand expectations and opportunities for frequent and timely visits among family members. Requirements for supervised visitation should be reevaluated frequently, and permission for unsupervised visits should be provided as family circumstances change. Families that do require supervised visitation should have venues for visitation close to where they live or where their children attend school, and hours for scheduling such visits should be flexible and expanded beyond the traditional work day.
2. Ensure that all family and child assessments are accurate, current, culturally relevant and dynamic in order to enhance understanding of families. As circumstances change, families should be reassessed so that opportunities to recognize positive change and promote reunification are acted upon with urgency.
3. Engage families in services relevant to their needs. Services such as parenting classes and drug testing should not be used uniformly or punitively. Services should be accessible to parents at accessible locations close to the neighborhoods where they live and at hours that allow them to continue to work. Services should include connections to economic supports.
4. Provide meaningful legal advocacy for parents and youth. Caseloads of court-appointed attorneys need to be drastically reduced. Parents need to be provided with legal advocacy to support reunification, and youth need legal help to maximize their chance for a permanent home when reunification fails.
5. Ensure that youth in foster care have comprehensive and current case plans that accurately reflect the existing strengths and needs of youth and their parents. As part of Fresno's case practice model development, ensure that youth are active participants in their case planning.
6. Consistently pursue permanency options for older youth. Outreach to find adoptive homes should continue for youth regardless of age, not stopped at an arbitrary age of 10 on the assumption that older children are not adoptable.
7. Find family connections for older youth while also helping develop skills to support their independence. Opportunities to visit family members should be encouraged even while youth are learning to live on their own.

8. Work closely with the state to take full advantage of the federal provisions in the Fostering Connections legislation to provide increased supports to youth while they are in foster care.

Fresno County Child Welfare Action Plan

A Changed Agency

For many years, Fresno County DSS has been committed to understanding the root causes of inequities within its system and working with the community to find solutions. From the beginning of the Institutional Analysis, the Department's leadership was committed to designing and implementing strategies based on the recommendations this report. After the conclusion of the Institutional Analysis and prior to the finalization of the report, Fresno County DSS took several immediate actions to begin addressing CSSP's preliminary findings. Fresno hopes its intensive review will help other jurisdictions grappling with the same problems and guide larger reforms nationally.

The Institutional Analysis findings have helped further focus, refine and motivate the overall work of Fresno County DSS. At the study's conclusion in December 2009, the Department, ignited by the experience, applied its deepened awareness and lessons learned to the efforts to address the disparities in the child welfare system.

First Steps - In the months following the analysis, Fresno County DSS worked to:

- Reframe the social worker's job description and function to emphasize advocacy for children and families and provide heightened supervisor support when issues hinder finding permanent families for children.
- Reassess agency structure and policies to encourage maximum family engagement, including changing visitation hours so they are feasible for children attending school and working parents.
- Improve services for families by enhancing links between improvement efforts and service provision, such as coordinated case planning that will connect families to supports (economic as well as more traditional child welfare services) that promote reunification and stability.
- Provide racial awareness and bias training to the agency's entire workforce of more than 300 employees to increase understanding of each individual's opportunity to mitigate bias.

Agency Goals - Fresno County DSS also established five high-priority goals and has made substantial progress toward achieving them:

- Establish a Quality Supervision approach that supports supervisors in modeling, coaching and guiding social workers to continuously develop and enhance their case review, engagement and teaming skills with families.
- Implement a Joint Community Response practice with community partners to more successfully engage African American families and conduct a more accurate up-front assessment of an individual family's needs.
- Improve front-end Team Decision-Making (TDM) practice to ensure authentic family, youth and community engagement is occurring.
- Increase legal and relational permanency, including timely reunification, for African American children and youth through Quality Engagement and Teaming practice.
- Increase the accessibility and quality of services for African American families and youth by clarifying protocols for visitation and drug testing services, as well as creating a community partnership network to better access community-based services for African American families and to advocate for filling identified gaps. Fresno County has modified contracts to expand supervised visitation hours to 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Saturday and holidays. Providers will also be responsible for providing supervised visits in three of the communities where the majority of African American families live.

The Road Ahead

Despite this significant progress, Fresno County DSS realizes it has more work ahead. In the next several months, it will work with a Disproportionality Advisory Committee (DAC) to integrate the study's formal recommendations with the agency's current improvement priorities, and over the next year, Fresno County DSS will continue to implement these improvement priorities. The DAC, composed of youth, parents, care providers, community partners, service providers, and agency staff will continue to hold the agency and broader community accountable for implementing the recommendation of the Institutional Analysis.

Fresno County DSS believes this review is just the first of many steps that the Department will take to fully understand and address the needs of the diverse community it serves. It hopes its work will inspire other public agencies to make a similar commitment to understanding the causes of inequities and expanding partnerships to improve opportunities and experiences for all of Fresno County's children, youth and families.

In furtherance of this work, on October 1, 2010, the state of California was awarded one of six federal grants to reduce long-term foster care stays for youth. As part of this grant, California will focus efforts on reducing racial disparities in four counties, one of which is Fresno. During

the planning phase, the other three counties will use a modified Institutional Analysis based on the findings in Fresno to craft action plans to address racial disparities and reduce long-term foster care stays for youth.

INTRODUCTION

Child protection systems across the country have the critical responsibility of intervening in families' lives where children are reported to be maltreated by their parents or caregivers. Once it intervenes with families, the child protection system—whether administered by state or county governments—must ensure children are safe with their families or other permanent families and must promote each child's overall health and well-being. Further, child protection systems and the courts should ensure the best results for each child and family with whom they intervene, regardless of race.

National data show, however, that African American and Native American children and their families have different outcomes when child protection services intervene. African American and Native American children and their families are more frequently reported for child maltreatment to child protection agencies,⁵ have higher rates of assignment of alleged reports for investigation by child protection agencies,⁶ and have higher rates of out-of-home placement than Caucasian children and their families.⁷ While it is believed that data may undercount the rate of Latino children in the child protection system, Latino children are also disproportionately present in several jurisdictions across the country.⁸ Once involved with these systems, children of color experience disparities in outcomes and services: specifically, they spend longer periods of time in out-of-home care and are less likely to reunify with their families, and oftentimes both children and their parents have less access to relevant and helpful social services.⁹ Outcomes regarding reunification, time spent in foster care, and number of placements for children and youth of color are, for the most part, alarmingly worse than they are for their Caucasian counterparts.¹⁰ Long-term life outcomes for children who remain involved in the child protection system as they mature tend to be bleak, with high rates of juvenile and adult incarceration, as well as bouts of homelessness, substance abuse, mental health issues and income insecurity.¹¹ Improving outcomes for all children involved in the child welfare system is not possible without resolving these disparities.¹² This requires an understanding of how agency policies and practices might contribute to or exacerbate poor outcomes experienced by families of color.

The Institutional Analysis (IA) process acknowledges that there are complex challenges faced by some African American families that also contribute to the racial disparities in the child welfare system. Poverty, lack of quality education, lack of well-paying jobs, proliferation of drugs and alcohol in poor communities, lack of decent and affordable housing and medical care and violence in homes and communities are real challenges that some African American families face and that can impact the care of their children. The IA acknowledges the impact of these factors and that the child welfare system alone cannot address the larger social inequities that influence individual lives; at the same time, the ways in which a system intervenes in the lives of families should not exacerbate racial inequities. *The purpose of the IA is to examine how system interventions currently contribute to negative outcomes for African American children and families.*

In examining the issues of disparities in services and outcomes, the IA specifically focuses on the experiences of African American children and families. The IA first uses quantitative data to determine where within a system disproportionality and disparity exist, and once priorities are determined, qualitative methods are implemented to identify problematic features of the child welfare system.¹³ This report describes the problematic practice identified by the IA in Fresno County, California. Institutional features (policies, practices, protocols, education and training, etc.) contributing to the poor outcomes for African American children and families identified in this report are both local to Fresno County and may have implications for work at the state and national levels.

During and after the IA study, the leadership of Fresno County DSS exemplified diligent commitment to self-examination, correction and ensuring equitable services and supports for all families. Fresno County leaders decided to tackle what is a difficult national problem. DSS provided extensive assistance in organizing the IA and devoting staff time to the process. Workers, supervisors, attorneys, community partners, parents, youth, and foster parents all willingly participated in the process and committed to improve DSS so that African American children and families are safe and strengthened by child welfare interventions.