

OVERVIEW: Placer County's unique implementation of Safety Organized Practice in its child welfare system has strengthened relationships with parents and reduced child detentions.

CHALLENGE: The Placer County Children's System of Care (CSOC), along with the state of California, recognize that children who spend many years in the foster care system often have negative outcomes. For this reason, CSOC has adopted a robust Safety Organized Practice (SOP) implementation strategy to avoid unnecessary detentions by bolstering family support and intervention upfront. At the same time, there has been negative stigma surrounding child welfare workers, particularly among families whose initial contact with the child welfare system is an unwelcome surprise ¹ This is a barrier to working with families, as parents often believe that CSOC's true intent is to sever parental ties, rather than support reunification. Families often see themselves at odds with social workers or lawyers and judges, rather than viewing these stakeholders as part of the same team. In order to reach Placer County's goal of keeping children safely at home, CSOC needed to overcome these barriers and gain parent buy-in by not just creating a more collaborative approach, but communicating it effectively.

INNOVATIVE SOLUTION: With input from parent and youth advocates, CSOC began an enhanced implementation of Safety Organized Practice including these strategies:

- Dependency Court Parent Orientations that include not just information-sharing but also hearing from other parents with lived experience. These powerful personal testimonials help parents understand that CSOC is their ally and partner.
- Increased Child and Family Teaming (CFT), including creative solutions such as placing CFTs in homes and hospitals, to help reduce the need for child separation.
- Expanded use of group supervision (bringing together many stakeholders in a child's life) and RED (Review, Evaluate, and Direct) Teams to encourage more collective and transparent decision-making throughout a case.

¹ Schreiber, J.C., Fuller, T., Pacey, M. Engagement in child protective services: Parents perceptions of work skills. Children and Youth Services Review 35 (2013) 707-715

As a result of these efforts, the county's child welfare system is experiencing a culture change – moving from distrust and tension between parties to a system of greater engagement and collaboration with families, with no increase in child maltreatment. The county has also worked to build awareness and understanding of this change among the public through public information materials.

ORIGINALITY: Many counties across California are moving toward Safety Organized Practice, and share some common approaches to increasing collaboration. However, Placer has pioneered a handful of unique strategies that have taken our implementation to the next level, including involving Child and Family Teams (CFT's) from the very beginning of the referral processes and having parents with lived experience conduct orientations. These trauma-informed and solution-oriented practices can be used as a model for other jurisdictions. In fact, UC Davis Learning Academy conducted a research project in Placer to replicate our implementation plan.

RESULTS: Parents who attend our NACO (National Association of Counties) award-winning Dependency Court Parent Orientations have noticed a strong desire on the part of the county to assist them in getting the necessary supports needed to maintain their child in the home, wherever possible, in contrast to past experiences. Notably, new petitions for detentions have decreased from a high of 386 in 2012 to fewer than 200 in 2017.

Without thoughtful and intentional interventions however, those results by themselves could suggest a lack of child protection. However, in Placer County rates of recurrence of child maltreatment actually dropped with this more intentional level of family engagement. In September of 2013, maltreatment reoccurrences (children who were victims of substantiated maltreatment allegations after prior substantiations) sat at 14.3 percent, prior to Safety Organized Practice implementation. By September of 2016, it had dropped to 10.1 percent, much closer to the national goal of 9.1 percent.

Broader public communication efforts around this shift have also seen success. The county's podcast featuring a family reunification story was listened to more than 500 times on SoundCloud, with additional listeners via iTunes, with user comments reflecting a deeper level of understanding of the system.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS: Podcast attached on USB or visit: soundcloud.com/placercounty/a-return-to-grace