STATE OF CALIFORNIA - HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY

ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER, *Governor*

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
744 P Street, Sacramento, California 95814

May 13, 2004

REASON FOR THIS TRANSMITTAL

[ ] State Law Change
[ ] Federal Law or Regulation Change
[ ] Court Order
[ ] Clarification Requested by One or More Counties
[X] Initiated by CDSS

ALL-COUNTY INFORMATION NOTICE NO. I-23-04

TO: ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS
ALL COUNTY CHIEF PROBATION OFFICERS
ALL CDSS ADOPTION DISTRICT OFFICES
ALL COUNTY AND PRIVATE ADOPTION AGENCIES
ALL COUNTY CHILD WELFARE SERVICES PROGRAM MANAGERS

SUBJECT: IMPLEMENTATION OF CONCURRENT PLANNING – PROMISING PRACTICES

This All-County Information Notice provides information about promising practices to assist with the implementation of concurrent planning [mandated by Assembly Bill 1544 (Chapter 793, Statutes of 1997)] to facilitate timely permanency for children in the Child Welfare Services system.

The Center for Social Services Research, University of California at Berkeley, has provided preliminary analysis of data from the study of Child Welfare Permanency Reforms. This research is based on the implementation of concurrent planning in six counties. The following promising practices have been summarized to reflect and support the efforts to implement concurrent planning:

- Early Search for Relatives and/or Absent Parents, and Resolution of Paternity;
- Specific Recruitment, Screening, Training and Support for Concurrent Placements;
- Collaborative Case Reviews Early in Case History and Ongoing;
- Integration of Child Welfare and Adoption Units and Agencies;
- Formal and Informal Communication Opportunities Between Workers; and
- Early Intensive Support Services to Birth Parents.

These documents are enclosed with this notice and are also available at: http://cssr.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/researchdetails.asp?name=promising.

If you have any questions regarding this notice, please contact Karen Gunderson, Manager of the Concurrent Planning Policy Unit at (916) 657-1858.

Sincerely,

Original signed by Patricia Aguiar

PATRICIA AGUIAR, Chief
Child and Youth Permanency Branch

Enclosures

c: CWDA

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CHILD WELFARE PERMANENCY REFORMS
FUNDED BY THE DAVID AND LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION, THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT, AND THE STUART FOUNDATIONS.

Concurrent Planning: Core Principles and Promising Practices

The following summary of Core Principles and Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning is based upon preliminary analyses of data from the study: **Child Welfare Permanency Reforms**. This research examines the implementation of concurrent planning in 6 California counties, through conducting focus groups and interviews with a variety of stakeholders in concurrent planning cases (i.e., social workers, supervisors, and child welfare managers; attorneys and judges; and foster parents and birth parents). The list below is a summary of concepts and practices that appear to reflect and support efforts to implement concurrent planning. These are based upon identified needs, observations about existing practice, and recommendations made by stakeholders in study counties as well as other California counties with strong records of well-developed concurrent planning practices. Future documents will describe in greater detail several of the promising practices.

Core Principles

- Child welfare agencies embrace concurrent planning on many levels in order for the system to operate effectively. A commitment of resources accompanies philosophical commitments. Concurrent planning is supported through a combination of policies, procedures, training efforts and communication between professionals, and thus the full responsibility for concurrent planning does not rest with individual social workers.

- The service approach is built on the concurrent planning philosophy that adults, rather than children, should assume the emotional risk in foster care; it assumes that adults are better able to manage the ambiguity of relationships and the uncertainty of an unknown future than are children, so the emotional burden is shifted.

- Relative placements are included in agencies' overall approach to concurrent planning.

- Birth parents, concurrent placement families, and relative caregivers are fully informed about role expectations, the nature of concurrent planning, and their case status throughout the life of the case.

- Families providing concurrent placements are able to actively embrace reunification efforts of birth parents and receive proactive professional support necessary to do so.

- Social workers and agencies implementing concurrent planning actively support the efforts of families providing concurrent placements.

- Birth parents are provided with adequate services to support reunification in a timely fashion, including sufficiently frequent visitation.

- Children are placed in permanent homes as early as possible.

- Children experience placement moves as infrequently as possible.

Promising Practices

- Concurrent planning practice is institutionalized through communication of the principles listed above by agency directors and managers, and translation into policies and practices at a variety of levels. This includes training on concurrent planning for child welfare workers and supervisors in all units of the agency. (Training communicates institutional support for acting in "dual" roles and clarification of roles for child welfare workers in various parts of the agency with respect to concurrent planning). Practical tools for implementing concurrent planning (e.g., guidelines, checklists, referral forms) are actively developed and disseminated. Policies and procedures incorporate concurrent planning as a valued mode of child welfare practice (e.g., inclusion of concurrent planning as a standard in employee evaluations).

- A formal search for relatives and absent parents, including resolution of paternity issues and compliance with Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) requirements, takes place early in every case.

- Specific recruitment, screening, training and support is provided to concurrent placement families (kin and non-kin) to assist in preparing for the emotional and practical challenges of concurrent plan ning.

- Regular collaborative case reviews encourage thoughtful discussion of concurrent planning alternatives, and provide collegial and supervisory support for workers making difficult decisions within limited time frames. Reviews begin early in case involvement to identify children needing a permanent plan, and ensure participants retain a sense of urgency regarding the need to consider concurrent plans (e.g., prior to the Jurisdictional/Dispositional Hearing; every 3 months for children under 3 years and every 6 months for children over 3; and reviews every 6 months for all children past termination of reunification services).

- The goals of child welfare and adoption units and agencies are integrated to promote concurrent planning, and the functions of each are carefully coordinated to meet these goals. This includes a formalized process of identification and "referral" of cases appropriate for concurrent placement, and training in the process conducted with workers and supervisors in all units of an agency. Whether an internal unit or an external agency is used for adoption services, cooperative working relationships are nurtured.

- Clear definitions and procedures are in place regarding the process and content of "full disclosure" regarding concurrent planning (e.g., who will know what, when, and how).

- Formal and informal opportunities for communication are available between workers with different responsibilities on concurrent planning cases (e.g., court workers, continuing services workers, and placement or adoption workers).

- Intensive support services to birth parents are available early in the reunification process (e.g., at Detention and Disposition) to help manage emotional reactions, facilitate parents' taking of responsibility, educate about the child welfare intervention process, and support engagement in services.

- Interagency committees and partnerships are developed in support of concurrent planning practice. Examples include a focus on early questions related to permanency (e.g., Behavioral Health screenings of all children and adults prior to Jurisdictional/Dispositional hearings, to consider service needs and their impact on case status), as well as later permanency issues (e.g., interagency review committees involving Child Welfare, Probation and Behavioral Health for older youth transitioning to emancipation, including an emphasis on identifying and forging relationships with individuals who can make a lasting emotional commitment to the youth).

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Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning:

Early Search for Relatives and/or Absent Parents, and Resolution of Paternity

This series of brief publications, *Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning*, provides descriptions of select practices identified through preliminary analysis of data from the study: **Child Welfare Permanency Reforms**. This study examines the implementation of concurrent planning in 6 California counties through focus groups and interviews with a variety of stakeholders in concurrent planning cases (i.e., social workers, supervisors, and child welfare managers; attorneys and judges; and foster parents and birth parents). Promising Practices from several non-study counties and agencies with well-developed concurrent planning approaches have also been examined. The practice approach described below represents work conducted in one or more of the following county child welfare agencies: Contra Costa, Mendocino, Monterey, Placer, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Mateo, and Yolo counties, as well as the Foster Family Agency, Sierra Adoptions. Although none of these Promising Practices have been empirically examined in terms of their impact on child and family outcomes, each of those highlighted appears to reflect and support efforts to implement concurrent planning.

Promising Practice: *A formal search for relatives and absent parents, including resolution of paternity issues and compliance with Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) requirements, takes place early in every case.*

Study participants in many counties indicated that a search for appropriate relative placements is a key aspect of concurrent planning and should occur as early as possible in each case. In one county, a specialized Search Unit conducts much of the preliminary work necessary for a concurrent placement to occur. Agency procedures ensure that all cases are screened through this special unit, thus increasing the likelihood that when appropriate, concurrent placements can be identified and secured for children as early as possible.

- The Search Unit workers conduct the time-intensive process of searching for and noticing all relevant parties, and ensure that paternity issues have been resolved, ICWA requirements have been addressed, and potential relative placements have been thoroughly studied prior to a child entering a non-kin concurrent placement. Documentation of such a referral is required for all cases scheduled for a California W & I Code 366.26 hearing.

- The Search Unit also screens for the presence of siblings in a case, so that placement of siblings together can be explored.

- Cases are required to be referred at the 6-, 12-, and 18-month review points. The Search Unit assesses the parents' status in their reunification efforts and whether the worker plans to continue services for the parent.

- If the Search Unit screens for relatives and determines that a non-kin concurrent placement would be appropriate, the unit obtains background information on the child, develops a written summary about the child and the legal risks in the case, and discusses permanency options with the current foster caregiver. The information is then passed on to a follow-up placement review committee, which selects the most appropriate permanent placement for the child.

According to workers and supervisors interviewed, early and thorough identification of parents and relatives and exploration of their appropriateness for placement can potentially prevent problems from arising later in a case. For example, this information not only increases possible placement options but also lowers the chance that an unknown relative might be identified late in the case and potentially disrupt an existing non-relative placement. This provides concurrent placement families with important information about case characteristics, and protects these placements from one potential source of disruption. In addition, child welfare workers in more than one county suggested that the task of researching paternity and relatives is a significant one, and that assignment of these tasks to a specialized unit may be an efficient use of resources. Finally, more than one interviewee suggested that the judiciary could play an additional role with respect to relatives, with Judges reiterating, in court, the need for parents to identify potential relative placements.

CSSR / School of Social Welfare, 16 Haviland Hall #7400, Berkeley CA 94720-7400
tel: 510.642.1899, fax: 510.642.1895, http://cssr.berkeley.edu

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Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning:

Specific Recruitment, Screening, Training and Support for Concurrent Placements

This series of brief publications, *Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning*, provides descriptions of select practices identified through preliminary analysis of data from the study: **Child Welfare Permanency Reforms**. This study examines the implementation of concurrent planning in 6 California counties through focus groups and interviews with a variety of stakeholders in concurrent planning cases (i.e., social workers, supervisors, and child welfare managers; attorneys and judges; and foster parents and birth parents). Promising Practices from several non-study counties and agencies with well-developed concurrent planning approaches have also been examined. The practice approach described below represents work conducted in one or more of the following county child welfare agencies: Contra Costa, Mendocino, Monterey, Placer, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Mateo, and Yolo counties, as well as the Foster Family Agency, Sierra Adoptions. Although none of these Promising Practices have been empirically examined in terms of their impact on child and family outcomes, each of those highlighted appears to reflect and support efforts to implement concurrent planning.

Promising Practice: *Specific recruitment, screening, training and support is provided to concurrent placement families (kin and non-kin), to assist in preparing for the emotional and practical challenges of concurrent planning.*

Although much concurrent planning practice occurs in the public child welfare setting, some public agencies have forged relationships with private Foster Family Agency (FFA) providers to develop concurrent planning services. One agency works with several California counties and offers a model for recruiting, training, selecting, and preparing caregivers for the tasks of concurrent planning. Some notable features of their work are:

- The service approach is built on the concurrent planning philosophy that adults, rather than children, should assume the emotional risk in foster care.
- Recruitment efforts for adoptive families, foster families, and "flexible families" (concurrent planning caregivers) are the same. The agency works out the caregiver's ultimate status as their involvement progresses.
- Caregiving families are placed in the adoptive family, foster family, or "flexible family" pool over a period of approximately five months. During this time they all participate in a standard foster parent/adoptive parenting training program in which significant attention is paid to the subject of concurrent planning.
- Families are asked to complete a survey developed in-house at the agency, that is designed to help assess a family's appropriateness for concurrent planning or other types of care. During the licensing and home-study processes, social workers continue to educate caregivers about the different types of care and continue to assess families for their appropriateness for concurrent care.
- When a placement is made, families are asked to sign a concurrent planning agreement form that helps to identify agency expectations, potentially challenging issues, confidentiality, etc.
- This FFA/county model mirrors the two-worker model utilized in some public child welfare agencies. In this setting, the public child welfare worker focuses primarily on family reunification, while the private agency worker primarily focuses on supporting the potentially permanent alternative home.

As an example of one approach to clarifying expectations for concurrent families, a modified version of the agency's Family Agreement Form is included here and can be adapted to other counties'/agencies' uses with permission from the agency (listed below).

Many interviewees, including child welfare workers, attorneys, and foster-adoptive parents indicated that screening, training, and clarity of expectations are crucial aspects of support for foster parents providing concurrent placement. Forms and training materials with information such as in the sample below may facilitate such clarity.

CONCURRENT PLANNING & FLEXIBLE FAMILY AGREEMENT

The concept of Concurrent Planning is a child-focused practice designed to:

- Minimize the number of placements a child experiences in foster care.
- Maximize the possibility that the child's foster parents are qualified and willing to be the child's adoptive family.

We have coined the term "Flexible Family" for this special category of family.

A Flexible Family:

- Supports a child's reunification efforts.
- Is willing to adopt if the child becomes free for adoption.
- Recognizes that reunification efforts may include multiple visitations with either or both birth parents, as well as visitation with other relatives (e.g., grandparents, siblings, etc.).
- May encounter emotional challenges as the child "moves through the system."
- May need additional support from their Social Worker.
- Knows that the placement is considered a "foster placement."
- Understands that the placement does not imply that adoption will occur, or even that the child will remain in the home of the Flexible Family during the course of reunification.

Your Social Worker will apprise you, the Flexible Family, of the child's situation prior to placement insofar as we have information. However, the very essence of a "flexible placement" means that there are many as yet undetermined variables and circumstances, and that we, most likely, will only have limited information at the time of placement. Many circumstances impact these placements, including but not limited to the following:

- The court disposition is unknown and unpredictable.
- County Social Workers cannot predict the outcome of a case.
- The birth parent moves to another county and the county agency moves the child.
- The birth parent enters alcohol/drug rehabilitation program and the child is "reunified" with the parent in the rehabilitation center.
- A relative (or "semi-relative") is found and the child is moved.
- A birth sibling or half-sibling is located and the child is moved; this may occur months after the initial placement with the Flexible Family.
- The worker for the child changes, and the new worker has a different philosophy and different plans.

I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information with regard to what it means to be a "Flexible Family," and that I have received a copy of this information.

_____ _____
Foster Parent #1 Date Foster Parent #2 Date

SIERRA ADOPTION SERVICES, P.O. Box 361, Nevada City, CA 95959 (530) 478-0900 (phone) (530) 478-0982 (fax) http://www.sierraadoption.org.

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Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning:

Collaborative Case Reviews Early in Case History and Ongoing

This series of brief publications, *Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning*, provides descriptions of select practices identified through preliminary analysis of data from the study: Child Welfare Permanency Reforms. This study examines the implementation of concurrent planning in 6 California counties through focus groups and interviews with a variety of stakeholders in concurrent planning cases (i.e., social workers, supervisors, and child welfare managers; attorneys and judges; and foster parents and birth parents). Promising Practices from several non-study counties and agencies with well-developed concurrent planning approaches have also been examined. The practice approach described below represents work conducted in one or more of the following county child welfare agencies: Contra Costa, Mendocino, Monterey, Placer, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Mateo, and Yolo counties, as well as the Foster Family Agency, Sierra Adoptions. Although none of these Promising Practices have been empirically examined in terms of their impact on child and family outcomes, each of those highlighted appears to reflect and support efforts to implement concurrent planning.

Promising Practice: *Regular collaborative case reviews encourage thoughtful discussion of concurrent planning alternatives, and provide collegial and supervisory support for workers making difficult decisions in limited time frames. Reviews begin early in case involvement to identify children needing a permanent plan and ensure participants retain a sense of urgency regarding the need to consider concurrent plans (e.g., prior to the Jurisdictional/Dispositional Hearing; every 3 months for children under 3 years, every 6 months for children over 3; and reviews every 6 months for all children past termination of reunification services).*

Concurrent planning decisions are difficult to make, particularly within short time frames. In order to promote the timely consideration of concurrent plans early in case histories, case reviews are implemented that are both systematic and supportive toward workers making case decisions. The highlights of several counties' approaches are presented here. The goals of these agency review meetings are to (1) assure that concurrent plans are developed for every child entering the child welfare system; (2) monitor concurrent plans and address changes in status or need; and (3) encourage thoughtful discussion of concurrent planning alternatives, and assist workers with decision-making by providing collegial and supervisory support.

Initial CCP Assessment/Development

For all children with Family Reunification case plans, an initial, mandatory meeting to assess and develop a concurrent plan is held. This meeting occurs between the Detention Hearing and the Juris/Dispo Hearing. Present at the meeting include the Emergency Response/Court worker, an Adoption Worker/Supervisor and a Family Reunification Worker/Supervisor. Together, they develop a concurrent plan after careful review of the child and the birth family's circumstances, the reunification plan and the reunification prognosis. The concurrent plan, or the steps being taken to develop the concurrent plan, are documented in the case record and in the Juris/Dispo court report.

CCP Evaluation

This committee meets to review all cases in which a child has been removed from the parents and remains in emergency foster care (or any other non-concurrent planning home) for more than 45 days. A core group of child welfare employees sits on the review team, including supervisors from units specializing in adoption, foster care licensing, group home placements and foster family agency care. If deemed appropriate, the child's foster parent or FFA representative will be included in the meeting.

At the meeting the committee assesses the case and, if appropriate, develops a plan geared towards locating and placing the child in a potentially permanent home. The discussion allows for consideration of alternative viewpoints and is designed to promote both thorough and efficient decision-making. At this meeting an adoption worker may be secondarily assigned to the case in order to provide assistance to the case-carrying worker, and/or to provide support and services to the concurrent planning home. If, at this meeting, it appears likely that the child will reunify the committee will assist the social worker in deciding upon the most appropriate non-concurrent planning placement, and the worker will bring the case back for review if circumstances change.

On-Going CCP Review

The next point of assessment for concurrent planning occurs 60 days prior to all review hearings. At this juncture the social worker is required to refer all cases to a review committee for re-evaluation for concurrent planning. If reunification with the birth parents appears unlikely, and the child is not already in a concurrent home, the review team may recommend that the social worker search for and facilitate such a placement. In addition, an adoption worker may be assigned secondarily to the case.

This on-going review serves as a trigger to re-focus the case-carrying social worker on the need for permanence for the child (if not with the birth parent, then with a concurrent family). Workers are offered assistance from colleagues in the process of thoughtfully considering various permanency alternatives for the child.

The review meetings described here offer collaborative opportunities to consider concurrent planning, to involve workers or units specializing in adoption and/or placement so that reunification workers need not carry the burden of decision-making alone, and to make other social workers aware of the child and his/her needs.

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Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning:

Integration of Child Welfare and Adoption Units and Agencies

This series of brief publications, *Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning*, provides descriptions of select practices identified through preliminary analysis of data from the study: **Child Welfare Permanency Reforms.** This study examines the implementation of concurrent planning in 6 California counties through focus groups and interviews with a variety of stakeholders in concurrent planning cases (i.e., social workers, supervisors, and child welfare managers; attorneys and judges; and foster parents and birth parents). Promising Practices from several non-study counties and agencies with well-developed concurrent planning approaches have also been examined. The practice approach described below represents work conducted in one or more of the following county child welfare agencies: Contra Costa, Mendocino, Monterey, Placer, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Mateo, and Yolo counties, as well as the Foster Family Agency, Sierra Adoptions. Although none of these Promising Practices have been empirically examined in terms of their impact on child and family outcomes, each of those highlighted appears to reflect and support efforts to implement concurrent planning.

Promising Practice: *The goals of child welfare and adoption units and agencies are integrated to promote concurrent planning, and the functions of each are carefully coordinated to meet these goals. This includes a formalized process of identification and "referral" of cases appropriate for concurrent placement, and training in the process conducted with workers and supervisors in all units of an agency. Whether an internal unit or an external agency is used for adoption services, cooperative working relationships are nurtured.*

The existing structure of child welfare and adoption services reflects a pre-concurrent planning separation of service provision. Study participants from several counties indicated that differences in organizational culture, training and philosophy exist between adoption and other child welfare workers. These differences may exist whether an internal adoption unit is used within a child welfare agency, or an external adoption agency provides those services. Under concurrent planning, a highly cooperative working arrangement between adoption and child welfare workers is required.

As an example of an external adoption agency, 28 California counties partner with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to provide adoption services for their child welfare clients. Prior to concurrent planning, counties typically referred cases to CDSS for permanency assessments subsequent to the failure of family reunification. However, the implementation of concurrent planning services necessitates that child welfare and adoption agencies work together earlier to determine alternative plans for children, should they be unable to return home.

Mechanisms that appear to enhance the abilities of child welfare and adoption agencies to work together and provide timely concurrent planning and adoption services to their clients can be categorized as (1) Communication, (2) Service Provision, and (3) Compromise.

Communication

- Child welfare agencies have regularly scheduled review meetings during which both concurrrent planning and adoption cases are staffed with representatives from the adoption agency. Generally this meeting is held at the child welfare agency and workers from any unit (emergency response through long term foster care) are invited to discuss any case in which permanency issues have been raised. All cases are staffed 60 days before the child welfare agency recommends termination of reunification services. During the review meeting joint decisions are made regarding the direction of the case and whether or not to make a formal referral to the adoption agency.

- Informal telephone and email contact between child welfare and adoption staff is encouraged to facilitate information-sharing and to educate each other about the details and trajectories of cases.

- Cross training between adoption and child welfare workers about roles and relevant policies is provided.

- Adoption and child welfare workers have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in child welfare cases as outlined during periodic reviews of the existing Memorandum of Agreement between agencies. Such an understanding reduces duplication while promoting shared goals related to concurrent planning, and prevents conflict around case management duties.

Service Provision

- If requested by the child welfare worker, adoption workers are involved in the initial assessment of relatives for long-term placement.
- The adoption agency home-studies county-licensed foster homes with an expressed interest in adoption, to reduce the need for placement changes, assist county agencies with the cost of placement, and speed adoption finalization.
- Subsequent to the termination of parental rights and placement of the child into a potential adoptive home, the adoption agency provides the child welfare agency with written updates of progress toward finalization. This encourages timely finalization.

Compromise

- If there is a disagreement between child welfare and adoption staff, a meeting is held with supervisors from both agencies or units to determine the best plan for the child.

Child welfare workers interviewed reported an appreciation of the involvement of adoption workers as it provides "another pair of eyes and ears" on each case. Regular efforts to facilitate communication between agencies ensure that child welfare and adoption agency staff are sensitive to the challenges in integrating their service goals (family reunification and adoption) and that they work together toward an overall vision of permanence for the child.

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Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning:

Formal and Informal Communication Opportunities Between Workers

This series of brief publications, *Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning*, provides descriptions of select practices identified through preliminary analysis of data from the study: **Child Welfare Permanency Reforms**. This study examines the implementation of concurrent planning in 6 California counties through focus groups and interviews with a variety of stakeholders in concurrent planning cases (i.e., social workers, supervisors, and child welfare managers; attorneys and judges; and foster parents and birth parents). Promising Practices from several non-study counties and agencies with well-developed concurrent planning approaches have also been examined. The practice approach described below represents work conducted in one or more of the following county child welfare agencies: Contra Costa, Mendocino, Monterey, Placer, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Mateo, and Yolo counties, as well as the Foster Family Agency, Sierra Adoptions. Although none of these Promising Practices have been empirically examined in terms of their impact on child and family outcomes, each of those highlighted appears to reflect and support efforts to implement concurrent planning.

Promising Practice: *Formal and informal opportunities for communication are available between workers with different responsibilities on concurrent planning cases (e.g., court workers, continuing services workers, and placement or adoptions workers)*

In some county agencies, a high degree of communication appears to occur between social workers regarding concurrent planning issues. Examples of factors facilitating this communication can be divided into three contributing influences: Structural (the organization of the Department), Formal (mandatory communication between workers), and Informal (non-mandatory communication between workers). The following is a description of one county's system and how it encourages communication between workers.

Structural

- Staff are organized into integrated teams. Each team includes at least one adoption worker and one licensing worker. In addition, there are several on-going (family reunification) social workers on the team.
- The integrated teams sit in close proximity to each other in the same building.
- Because it is a small county, the supervisor of the Court Unit is also the supervisor for the Adoptions Unit.

Formal

- The integrated teams have a weekly meeting during which they staff cases within their unit.
- Some Integrated Team supervisors require the social workers to prepare structured case presentations during the weekly meetings. This ensures that workers in various roles have an understanding of the range of case needs.
- An automated system tracks the length of time a child is in care, and flags cases for presentation to a concurrent planning review meeting to assure that the child is placed in a potentially permanent home (if appropriate). For children younger than three years old, the computer flags the cases after three months in care. For children older than three years old, the computer flags the cases after nine months in care. After the staffing, the case may be formally assigned to an adoption worker (within the case-carrying social worker's team) for follow-up.

Informal

- Because the agency is small, all of the social workers are familiar with one another and an open dialogue exists regarding cases and case plans.
- Adoption workers on each team act as consultants to the ongoing reunification social workers (and vice-versa) as an outgrowth of their integrated team function and personal familiarity.

Although the formal and informal opportunities for intra-agency communication may be most readily facilitated in smaller county agencies, larger agencies may benefit from efforts to similarly co-locate workers and integrate functions. Workers in one county using such an approach report ease of communication and access to a range of expertise that positively impacts casework, saying that "our entire staff is working together from the beginning to look at permanence issues."

CSSR / School of Social Welfare, 16 Haviland Hall #7400, Berkeley CA 94720-7400
tel: 510.642.1899, fax: 510.642.1895, http://cssr.berkeley.edu

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Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning:

Early Intensive Support Services to Birth Parents

This series of brief publications, *Promising Practices in Concurrent Planning*, provides descriptions of select practices identified through preliminary analysis of data from the study: **Child Welfare Permanency Reforms**. This study examines the implementation of concurrent planning in 6 California counties through focus groups and interviews with a variety of stakeholders in concurrent planning cases (i.e., social workers, supervisors, and child welfare managers; attorneys and judges; and foster parents and birth parents). Promising Practices from several non-study counties and agencies with well-developed concurrent planning approaches have also been examined. The practice approach described below represents work conducted in one or more of the following county child welfare agencies: Contra Costa, Mendocino, Monterey, Placer, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Mateo, and Yolo counties, as well as the Foster Family Agency, Sierra Adoptions. Although none of these Promising Practices have been empirically examined in terms of their impact on child and family outcomes, each of those highlighted appears to reflect and support efforts to implement concurrent planning.

Promising Practice: *Intensive support services to birth parents are available early in the reunification process (e.g., at Detention and Disposition), to help manage emotional reactions, facilitate responsibility-taking, educate about the child welfare intervention process, and support engagement in services.*

High quality reunification services are the foundation of an ethical concurrent planning program. In one California county, a family support agency provides services to birth parents including support groups, parenting classes and supervised visitation. Child care is offered to parents while participating in groups and classes.

All parents whose children are detained are immediately referred to the agency to begin supportive services. If the family consists of two parents, they are referred to separate support groups to address their individual needs. Parents are mandated to participate in an Intake Support Group prior to being offered additional family reunification services (with the exception of substance abuse treatment services, which are provided elsewhere).

The family support agency is funded by the public child welfare agency and is staffed with a combination of seasoned child welfare social workers/supervisors and social service aides. In addition, licensed mental health clinicians from the community are contracted to co-facilitate the therapeutic groups (facilitated by both a child welfare worker and a mental health practitioner). Some of the social service aides working for the agency are former child welfare clients who successfully completed case plans and now help others navigate the system. Services provided to birth parents through the agency are as follows:

Intake Support Group

- An eight week support group available to the parents directly after detention of their children.
- The group's goal is to help the parent deal with anger, confront denial, and become educated about the court process and the child welfare system.
- Facilitators help parents understand the life changes necessary in order to "get CPS out of their lives."
- Facilitators conduct a Mental Health assessment of the parent, which assists the child welfare agency and the court in developing a case plan that will help the parent meet case goals.
- After two sessions of the Intake Support Group a case conference is held (for the purpose of information sharing), bringing together the group facilitators, the birth parent and the child welfare worker.

Family Empowerment Plan

- An "Empowerment Plan" is developed subsequent to completion of the Intake Support Group and prior to the parent joining an Empowerment Group. This plan is a step-by-step blueprint of what the parent needs to do in order to reunify with his/her children.
- Participants in the Empowerment Plan Meeting include the parent, the social worker and the Empowerment Group facilitator.
- The purpose is to review the case plan (using a strengths-based perspective), establish goals and objectives, establish a time line, and begin to build a relationship between the Empowerment Group facilitator and the parent.

Empowerment Group

- A four to six week group during which the participants set weekly action plans and gain awareness of their personal strengths and limitations.
- The group consists of "veteran" child welfare clients as well as parents new to the system. This promotes the sharing of information and experiences between group participants.
- During this stage of the case plan there are weekly progress reports between the group facilitators and the child welfare worker. Through this open line of communication, adjustments can be made to the case plan based on the parent's success or lack of success.
- After completion of the Empowerment Group, case conferences and case reviews are scheduled as needed.

Child welfare staff report that the program has been successful with birth parents in general, and that it offers a context in which birth parents can be provided with information about concurrent planning. "We are not trying to tell the families what to do.... We inform them of the steps that the Court requires and then ask them what else they need. This is a good process and another place to bring up the fact that, if they fail to reunify, adoption is a possible outcome for their children."

In focus groups, birth parents report very positive experiences with agency services. Participants report feeling a sense of emotional safety in the groups, that the facilitators are "real people" that "don't tell you what to do" but instead "give you other roads to take... give you ideas." The services offer birth parents a forum in which they feel "safe from repercussions" and that it "makes it a lot easier... to do what you have to do." Participants report learning parenting skills, including how to conduct a family meeting and how to validate children's feelings. They found it beneficial that the staff arranged and participated in meetings with social workers, in which the agency's expectations could be clarified. One birth parent suggested that as a result of her involvement in services, the positive change in relation to her family could be described as the difference between "light and dark;" another stated that the agency staff "saved my life."