

July 13, 2001

Honorable Judge Melville, Presiding Judge
Santa Barbara County Superior Court
312-C Cook Street
Santa Maria, California 93456

Subject: Board of Supervisors' Response to the 2000-2001 Grand Jury Report titled: "A New Look at Child Welfare Services"

Dear Judge Melville:

During its regular meeting of July 24, 2001, the Board of Supervisors adopted the attached Grand Jury Responses as the Board's responses to the findings and recommendations contained in the 2000 – 2001 Grand Jury Report titled: "A New Look at Child Welfare Services".

The Board thanks the Grand Jury for its work to identify and recommend improvements to the provision of child welfare services in Santa Barbara County, and for the findings and recommendations contained in the subject report.

Joni Gray
Chair, Board of Supervisors

Enclosures: (1) Board of Supervisors' Response to the Grand Jury Report
(2) Department of Social Services Response to the Grand Jury Report
(3) Copy of the 2000-2001 Grand Jury Report titled, "A New Look at Child Welfare Services"

CC: Charlene Chase, Department of Social Services

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
Grand Jury Responses
2000-2001 Grand Jury Report entitled “ A New Look at Child Welfare Services”

FINDINGS

Finding 1: A "foster home" is a County-licensed home that is run by foster parents (though there might be only one) in which 24-hour care and supervision in a family setting are provided to up to six dependent children under 18 years of age.

Response to Finding 1: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree**).

Finding 2: "Emergency-care foster homes" take children into protective custody at any time of the day or night, seven days a week while their cases are being investigated.

Response to Finding 2: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree**. As clarified by Social Services, Child Welfare Services (CWS) "takes" children into custody. Emergency care foster homes "receive" children who are taken into custody by CWS).

Finding 3: "Therapeutic care foster homes" are run by specially trained foster parents for seriously emotionally disturbed dependent children, many of whom are in a MISC program. Therapy is not provided in these homes.

Response to Finding 3: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree**. Although clinical therapy is not provided in therapeutic care foster homes they are run by foster parents that are specially trained to provide care for emotionally disturbed children. As noted by the Grand Jury, many of the emotionally disturbed dependent children are in a MISC program and receive various therapeutic services through MISC.)

Finding 4: "Group homes" are State-licensed facilities that provide 24-hour care and supervision to dependent children in a structured environment, with services provided, at least in part, by trained staff employed by the licensee.

Response to Finding 4: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisor's response. (**Agree**.)

Finding 5: A "dependent child" is a child who has been removed from his or her home for various reasons other than the commission of a crime. The courts are petitioned to and then do determine whether and where to place them.

Response to Finding 5: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree**. As clarified by Social Services, there are "dependent" children who

are **not** removed from their homes and who receive community services in order to strengthen their families of origin.)

Finding 6: From July 1999 to June 2000, there was an average of 113 County-licensed foster homes with a total of 251 beds in Santa Barbara County.

Response to Finding 5: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 7: From July 1999 to June 2000, there were about eight State-licensed group homes with 51 beds and three residential care facilities with 144 beds in Santa Barbara County. The five Santa Barbara County group homes have a total of 51 beds.

Response to Finding 7: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 8: The Santa Barbara Department of Social Services is currently using only four of the available 51 group home beds and is sending 26 children to group homes outside the County.

Response to Finding 8: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**) As clarified by Social Services, not all of the beds identified are available to Child Welfare Services children.

Finding 9: For the period ending June 30, 2000, there were 552 children in various types of out-of-home care in Santa Barbara County. As a group, they spent an average of 37 months in a facility.

Response to Finding 9: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Disagree partially.** As noted by Social Services there were 531 children in various types of placement for the period ending June 30, 2000 and 552 children for the period ending June 30, 1999. Further, of the 531 children in placement for the period ending June 30, 2000, 232 children or 44% were placed with relatives or guardians.)

Finding 10: By law, CWS must send a social worker to visit each child under its protection at least once a month.

Response to Finding 10: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 11: It costs roughly \$139 per half-day to send a social worker to a nearby county and roughly \$629 per day to fly the social worker to Northern California.

Response to Finding 11: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 12: Many more dependent children than ever before are hard to deal with for a variety of reasons ranging from aggressive and/or abusive behavior to illness, disability, and drug or alcohol addiction. These are referred to as high-need/high-risk children.

Response to Finding 12: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 13: The Santa Barbara Social Services Department and its Child Welfare Services management are wedded to the foster care model of child welfare because of its allegedly homelike atmosphere. When they have to place dependent children in group homes, they usually place them in group homes outside of the County.

Response to Finding 13: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Disagree partially.** As noted by Social Services, a number of factors are considered when deciding to place a child out of home. In addition to the legal mandates that require the Department to place at a certain Residential Care Level, which is based on the treatment needs of the child, and ordered by the Court, an assessment of the individual child's needs based on Best Practice and concurrent planning is considered. Other considerations relate to availability and experience with the group homes.)

Finding 14: Neither the State nor Santa Barbara County has done any research on what happens to children after they leave the Child Welfare Services system.

Response to Finding 14: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 15: Very little is known about what happens to children after they leave the Child Welfare Services system; more importantly, very little is known about whether any of the programs work and, if not, why not.

Response to Finding 15: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 16: Dependent children are wards of the Court; many made so because of dysfunctional families.

Response to Finding 16: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 17: Dependent children should be given out-of-home care that not only makes them feel comfortable but also prepares them for successfully living outside of it.

Response to Finding 17: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 18: Santa Barbara County foster care generally does not provide the homelike atmosphere it is thought to provide.

Response to Finding 18: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Disagree.** As noted by Social Services, foster care homes may not be the ideal placement for all foster children. However, foster care homes do provide an opportunity for children in foster care to be raised in the most homelike settings available. Licensed foster homes in Santa Barbara County do provide the most homelike settings, as they are often single home dwellings within the community.)

Finding 19: Most of the foster homes in the County are run by single women without husbands or other male role models to assist them, so the atmosphere often is not ideally "homelike."

Response to Finding 19: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Disagree.** 70% of the licensed foster homes in Santa Barbara County are two parent male/female households. Please reference Social Services response, which includes a breakdown by household type and region.)

Finding 20: There are too many repeat and multiple placements, suggesting that foster home care may not be ideally stable.

Response to Finding 20: **Disagree Partially.** As noted by Social Services in their response to the Grand Jury, the primary reason for repeat and multiple placements is to insure the individual needs of the child are met. To assume that repeat and multiple placements are the result of foster homes not being ideally stable is inaccurate.

Finding 21: Not all children are best served by foster home care, and not all children can even be handled in foster homes.

Response to Finding 21: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 22: Placement of dependent children in the first instance is done by a social worker, usually the caseworker that is first assigned to the child.

Response to Finding 22: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 23: The assessment of the child has usually just begun when the child is first placed into out-of-home care.

Response to Finding 23: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors response. (**Agree.**)

Finding 24: Unless the caseworker has personal knowledge of the suitability of available foster and group homes, there is little to go on in the initial placement, because there is no database with detailed information on the homes.

Response to Finding 24: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors response. (**Disagree.** Response incorporated with Findings 25 and 26.)

Finding 25: Oftentimes, the caseworker does not know the child (e.g., his or her physical or mental health) or the suitability of the child's "fit" with the home.

Response to Finding 25: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors response. (**Disagree.** Response incorporated with Finding 26.)

Finding 26: Because of the lack of knowledge about the children and the available homes, many initial placement errors occur and a chain of multiple placements often results.

Response to Finding 26: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. Due to the importance of this finding, the response is repeated in its entirety. The attachments referenced are attached to the Department of Social Services response. (**Disagree.** The placement process is essentially a four-prong process. First there is an "emergency" placement where the priority is physical safety and protection. Once physical safety is secured, a search for viable relatives is sought to establish a more permanent and stable home for the child if family reunification services are unsuccessful. Social workers utilize a thorough and comprehensive tool to assess relatives. First, an emergency home study conducted by the assigned emergency response caseworker determines the initial appropriateness of the relatives (Attachment 4). Next, a more thorough and comprehensive relative assessment and home study is conducted by a concurrent planning social work practitioner (Attachment 5). The concurrent planning worker is trained, skilled, and specializes in assessing, evaluating, and making clinical recommendations pertaining to the appropriateness of relatives or other caretakers as possible permanent homes for children. During this process, the assigned emergency response worker is concurrently gathering information on the needs of the child as well as offering services to the parents.

Once the concurrent planning worker completes the assessments on relatives, the assigned worker, the concurrent planning worker, and their respective supervisors consult regarding the most suitable placement for the child. If there are no relative resources, a foster home is most likely sought as the next "least restrictive" placement option. The assigned worker confers with a licensing/placement specialist to best match the needs of the child with an available foster home ideally in the child's community or geographic region.

If, during this multiple level assessment process and professional review, the assigned social worker learns that the child needs a more restrictive placement than a foster home, the group home search is initiated. The assigned social worker in collaboration with other personnel from Alcohol Drug & Mental Health Services (ADMHS), Probation, Education, and the Department of Social Services staff the case to determine the need and appropriateness of a more restrictive placement. In fact, if the child requires the highest level of care, an ADMHS practitioner must certify this placement. The Court must then agree with the more restrictive level of placement. The licensing/placement specialist then searches for the most appropriate group home facility that meets the child's needs.

Due to the essential functions of the licensing/placement worker, Santa Barbara County Child Welfare Services has staffed two full-time equivalent positions in order to focus and specialize on the most appropriate out-of-home placements for children. The State funds for less than one full-time equivalent position (.7 FTE). The licensing/placement workers regularly visit group homes; in addition to licensing and renewing foster care licenses that require at least an annual home visit. These on-site visits build expertise and knowledge of the out-of-home facilities.

Initial placement errors and multiple placements are not necessarily the result of lack of knowledge about the child or available homes. As indicated in our introduction, the Grand Jury's findings regarding this issue is over-simplified for such a complex issue. The California Alliance of Child and Family Services indicates that the lack of assessment tools, knowledge and training are not the primary causes to the problem of "marginal" or "mis-matched" placements (Attachment 3). These "less than optimal" placements result from two factors.

- First, social workers' caseloads can leave them insufficient time to conduct a comprehensive assessment and identify the group home that best meets the needs of the individual child. Santa Barbara County has realized that in order to meet complex needs, more than one worker is necessary even though the State does not fund that worker. Hence, Santa Barbara County Child Welfare Services has the assigned caseworker and a placement/resource worker allocated utilizing Child Welfare Services Block Grant funds to meet the needs of children.
- Second, group homes often are full or have waiting lists. Once the most appropriate group home program for a child is identified, the staff may have no choice but to make a less than optimal placement decision. This may entail:
 - The child may be placed in an appropriate program located far from their home.
 - The child may be placed in a high quality program close to home that is not designed to meet his/her specific needs.
 - The child may be placed in a facility that the social worker would prefer not to use but has no better option at the time.

There is a significant shortage of group home beds in California that provide the needed services for children who require the higher level of care.

Finding 27: While the foster homes are licensed annually, once initially trained and licensed, a foster parent is not regularly evaluated nor otherwise monitored, nor is he and/or she given more training to do the job better.

Response to Finding 27: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Disagree.** As clarified by Social Services, licensing occurs on an annual basis. Additionally, children in placement are seen by their assigned social worker on a monthly basis in the foster home so there is ongoing evaluation being conducted. Monitoring is also an ongoing process. Any concerns are reported to the licensing worker who then conducts an independent investigation. Social Services further clarifies that Title 22 requires licensed foster parents to attend and complete 8 hours of training annually. No additional placements may be made into a foster home if the annual training is not completed. In addition to mandatory training, Social

Services provide a variety of specialized training and support for foster parents as described within their response.)

Finding 28: When the going gets too tough, many foster parents cannot cope and simply make the child move on to another foster home. Consequently, there are more and more multiple placements.

Response to Finding 28: **Disagree Partially.** Generally children need to move from a foster home due to their individualized special needs, which usually require a higher level of care. These children are placed in either a Foster Family Agency or a Group Home which offers therapeutic services that are more intensive than the ones offered by the Family Foster Home model. Therefore, the changes in placements result from the children's diverse specialized needs not the inability of the foster home to deal with the children. To imply that foster parents "cannot cope and simply make the child move to another foster home" is an oversimplification and diminishes the level of commitment and dedication of Santa Barbara County's foster parents.

Finding 29: There are simply too many children who "blow out" of foster homes and/or have serious problems (ranging from medical or physical disability to significant antisocial behavior) to be cared for effectively in a foster home setting.

Response to Finding 29: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**Agree.**)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Board of Supervisors should seriously consider establishing a Crisis Center for high-need/high-risk children to provide both emergency and transitional care for these children.

Response to Recommendation 1: **The recommendation requires further analysis. As required by California Penal Code Section 933.05 (b) (3), the timeframe for the analysis of this recommendation shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury Report, issued May 16, 2001.** As noted in the Department of Social Services response to the Grand Jury, a process is underway to analyze options to implement this recommendation. On April 6, 2001 the Department issued a Request for Proposals for Specialized Residential Youth Programs. Two proposals were received and additional information has been sought from one of the respondents. As indicated by Social Services, an ongoing process to determine how best to meet the needs of the children and how to fund the necessary programs and facilities must be answered prior to implementing this recommendation. Social Services response indicates they anticipate the recommendation will be implemented within 12 to 24 months.

Recommendation 2: This Crisis Center should be located in mid-County.

Response to Recommendation 2: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. (**The recommendation requires further analysis**) An analysis of the best location for a crisis center will be undertaken as part of the larger analysis of how to establish and fund such a center.

Recommendation 3: The Department of Social Services should train, supervise, and support foster parents in the manner now used by CALM for the therapeutic foster homes it manages for Child Welfare Services.

Response to Recommendation 3: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. **(The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.)** As stated by Social Services, not all children and foster parents require the therapeutic level of training and support suggested in the therapeutic foster care model. Social Services has developed a variety of opportunities to train, support, and supervise foster parents as well as relative caregivers. Please reference Social Services response for list of some of the training and support opportunities offered by Social Services. Social Services continually evaluates the needs of foster parents and foster children and works to provide training and support to best meet the needs of both.

Recommendation 4: The Department of Social Services should encourage foster parents to attend and participate in meetings of the Santa Barbara County Foster Parents Association so that they can share their experiences and knowledge with each other.

Response to Recommendation 4: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. **(The recommendation has been implemented.)**

Recommendation 5: The Department of Social Services should provide more professional and supervisory support to line staff to help reduce the high turnover and short tenure of employment that currently exists in the Department.

Response to Recommendation 5: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. **(The recommendation has been implemented.)**

Recommendation 6: The Department of Social Services should make every effort to rehabilitate the families of dependent children before they are reunified with their parents, as the law requires.

Response to Recommendation 6: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. **(The recommendation has been implemented.)**

Recommendation 7: The Department of Social Services should conduct and/or sponsor outcome research to determine, to the greatest extent possible, what happens to children when they leave foster care, and use the data as feedback to help modify Department practices to improve outcomes.

Response to Recommendation 7: The Board adopts the Department of Social Services response as the Board of Supervisors' response. **(The recommendation will not be implemented as stated because it is not reasonable that Social Services be the sponsor of outcome research.** However, the Department of Social Services and the Board strongly supports outcome measures and agrees that research related to the foster care system should be undertaken and utilized to improve upon the system. As noted by Social Services, the California Department of Social Services is working with UC Berkeley to develop measures to assess current programs and evaluate how these programs are administered. In addition, new Federal mandates are being implemented regarding outcomes. The development of these outcomes are at the early stage and are being analyzed as they are implemented at the state and local levels