



2009 – 2010
Madera County Grand Jury
Final Report
Child Welfare Services

Prepared By: Public Safety & Welfare Committee

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Introduction:

On October 1, 2009, members of the Madera County Grand Jury visited the Madera County Department of Social Services (DSS) Child Welfare Services (CWS). This Department had not been interviewed in recent years. Pursuant to Penal Code 925 (a) the Madera County Grand Jury reviewed the annual budget. A presentation and overview of the workings of the CWS was given by the supervisors of the various departments.

Findings:

Child abuse or neglect is governed by Penal Codes 11165 – 11174.3. There are 500,000 reports of child abuse annually in the State of California. Madera County, in 2008, received 2,551 total referrals of which 486 were substantiated.

Child abuse may involve multiple categories and includes both acts and omissions of inflicting injury or the failure to act when an injury results. Included are acts of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and emotional abuse. Sixty percent of substantiated referrals are general neglect.

CWS contains a continuum of programs that include Emergency Response, Family Maintenance, Family Reunification and Permanent Placement in collaboration with county and community based organizations. Each program supervisor has a Masters Degree in Social Work. Forty hours of continuing education is required bi-annually.

Emergency Response is considered the front door of the investigation into child abuse and welfare. This process includes intake, screening, structured decision making, assignment and investigations in accordance with Federal and State mandates. A 24/7 hotline for reporting potential abuse or neglect takes the information from reporting parties to determine the type of response necessary. Penal Code 11165 is the authority for assessing allegations of child abuse and neglect and making a determination for the appropriate level of response. If an investigation reveals a child is at risk, emergency response prevention services may be offered for a maximum of 30 days.

Family Maintenance service is a safety plan which involves Voluntary Family Maintenance (VFM) and Court Family Maintenance (CFM). With VFM, the family voluntarily accepts and is

willing to complete child welfare program services offered by the DSS. With CFM, the children are made dependents of the court and the parents are court ordered to participate in the DSS services offered.

The Family Reunification program provides services through the DSS to address issues that brought the case to the court's attention, in an effort to safely return the children home. Out of home placements include a relative's home, a foster care home or group home. The Family Reunification Social Worker responsibilities include a minimum monthly contact visit to the custodial family and child/children developing case plans, assessing progress, staffing, court reports and arranging weekly visitation for siblings, parents and grandparents.

The Permanent Placement program primarily focuses on services to provide the most stable, alternate permanent home possible for each child. The primary goal is adoption for children whose parent's parental rights have been terminated. Madera County contracts with the California Department of Social Services District Office in Fresno. It is a collaborative work to achieve a common goal. Adoption services are provided to children who are dependents of the Madera County Juvenile Court and are eligible for adoption. In 2008, 132 children were involved in the Permanent Placement services. Of those 132 children, 35 children were adopted, 7 were returned to a parent(s) and 11 were emancipated out of foster care.

While members of the Madera County Grand Jury were at the CWS offices, an artistic tree was observed hanging on the wall (see cover page) representing the California Permanency of Youth Project. This project is designed to help those children who have lost connection with their families and is an attempt to connect them with someone whom the child has identified as important in their life.

Child abuse is a chronic problem within the County. There are numerous resources within the County that have partnered with CWS to address this problem. These resources include Behavior Health Services, Family Treatment Center, Victim Services, First Five, Madera Access Point, Public Health Department, Housing Authority, Court Appointed Advocate and Healthy Beginnings.

The current CWS budget of \$4,600,000 reflects a \$340,000 reduction from 2008. DSS has avoided lay-offs by not filling vacant positions.

DSS also offers the Independent Living Program to current and former foster youth. The program focuses on helping the youth gain basic life skills in order to become independent self-sufficient adults. Children ages 16 and over, who are in the foster care system, are eligible for such services up to the age of 21.

Conclusions:

The Madera County Grand Jury found the staff to be compassionate and dedicated. Their dedication has even gone as far as spending the night in their offices with a child in crisis while placement was being assessed. It was found that the DSS and CWS is providing quality services with other agencies and is actively promoting the safety and well being of our community by preserving and protecting the dignity of individuals and families. The staff is continually striving to improve their service and increase their efficiency with weekly team meetings. The Madera County Grand Jury commends the DSS and CWS for the job that they are performing within their budget.

Recommendations:

None

Respondents: Written response required pursuant to PC933 (c)

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