

Child welfare: attention deficit

California's overloaded child welfare workers don't have time to do their job right

Happy ending: It takes time

Stories illustrating the need for caseload reduction are featured in *Protecting Children, Restoring Families, It Takes Time*, a 1998 report from Local 535 of the Service Employees International Union.

In 1993, for example, Wren Atilano-Bradley, a Monterey County social worker, met with a mother charged with felony abuse for severely beating her daughter, Juanita. Atilano-Bradley was the first person in the system that the mother, Maria, could speak with in Spanish, her only language. Maria said she was overwhelmed caring for Juanita, who unpredictably acted out at home and at school. She seemed genuinely remorseful and pleaded for a chance to show she could be a better parent.

At the time, Atilano-Bradley had a manageable caseload and could give Maria that chance. She placed Juanita in foster care—after driving around for days to find a Spanish-speaking foster mother. Meanwhile she set Maria up with a family therapist.

But the foster mother reported that Juanita continued to act out in unusual ways. When she said that the child at times rolled her eyes and urinated on the floor, Atilano-Bradley took Juanita for a medical exam. It turned out that Juanita was having seizures—when she started taking medication, the problems were resolved.

Meanwhile, Maria was sentenced to in-home detention, which meant Atilano-Bradley had to get court permission every time she took Maria to visit her daughter.

The case closed almost eight years ago, but social worker and client keep in contact. Maria enjoys a close relationship with her now-adult daughter, who had returned to live with her within a year.

In a similar case today, the mother might go to prison, the daughter might spend years in foster care, and the seizures might not be diagnosed as soon. Atilano-Bradley "was able to see Maria as often as every other day, spending several hours per visit," the report points out. "Workers don't have that much time anymore." ■

Ask most California foster kids how to improve the foster care system and chances are they'd answer: more time spent with fewer people.

Former foster kid Alexa Goodenough, who at 19 has "aged out" of the system, says, "I had 54 different case-workers and 20 different placements between the ages of three and 18.

"I can't remember what happened when I was really little and no one else knows because I couldn't speak up for myself," she says. "Even when I got old enough to express my complaints, I didn't know my rights and didn't know who to call."

The least of her problems was that she missed a lot of school field trips because she needed the county's permission to go and could never reach folks in time. Far more serious was her situation at one foster home.

"When I was 11, I had a foster mother who would punish me by locking me in my room for two-week periods, allowing me to leave only for school and to go to the bathroom. I even had to have my meals in the room," she says.

During the two years she lived with that foster mother, Goodenough says, she was able to talk to social workers only twice—two different people who didn't believe it was necessary to remove her from the foster home. She was moved only after the foster mother decided to stop working with the agency.

Now a student at Sacramento City College and a counselor in the office of California's Foster Care Ombudsman, Goodenough is studying to be a social worker. But she wants to work in private practice. "I really hope to be helping people in hard situations," she says. That wasn't her experience of the child welfare system.

Caseload crunch

The average social worker in the California child welfare system is responsible for almost twice as many children than it's possible to serve adequately. That was the conclusion of a 2000 legislative report, which recommended that to meet minimum federal standards, the average social worker's caseload should be cut in half. To meet optimal standards, caseloads would need to be reduced by more than 60 percent.

A "family maintenance" worker trying to help families avoid foster care, for example, is responsible for an average of 29 cases a month. The maximum recommended number is 14; the "optimum" 10, according to the report.

A coalition of child advocates last year introduced AB 364 to provide funds to reduce caseloads, but the recession and energy crisis stalled the effort. The social workers' union, Local 535 of the Service Employees International Union, says it will push for a vote on AB 364 again this year.

Meanwhile caseloads remain high—highest in Los Angeles, says Richard Bermack, Local 535 press liaison. A



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report by the 1999-2000 Los Angeles County grand jury found that on average, L.A. social workers were carrying three times the caseload of social workers in New York City. It estimated that L.A. social workers spend 30 minutes or less with each child each month.

What's more, Bermack adds, more than 20 percent of social workers are now leaving the profession statewide—up from 11 percent in 1997.

Unnecessary pain

"There are kids going into the foster system that might not have to be there if we had more time to spend with parents," says San Diego social worker Brian Polejes. As an emergency response worker, responding to allegations of child abuse, he works on 20 or more cases at a time.

To keep families together, "parents need to know about programs and services for themselves and the kids—for example, how to get medical services, find affordable child care, and get help with problems like substance abuse," Polejes says.

It takes time to set up a "family unity meeting," in which concerned family and community members get together to agree on a plan to help the parents—or to actually take in the kids, keeping them close to family and friends. "It can take several hours to set a meeting like this up, and the meetings themselves can take two to four hours," Polejes says. "If we had reduced caseloads and more time, we could plan more events like unity meetings. I've seen them work—and I've seen chil-

dren benefit because they were placed with people who knew them and really cared."

Sound investment

Polejes is rooting for Local 535's effort to pass AB 364. "Given the current budget crisis, it is unlikely to pass in that form," he acknowledges, "but we have discussed modifying it so that it could pass and provide real caseload relief to workers who want to protect children."

The state may need to spend money to save money, says Andy Shaw, principal consultant with the Assembly Human Services Committee. At a hearing last year in support of AB 364, Shaw said, "By lowering caseloads... social workers will be able to better serve children and families, thereby reducing the number of children who must be placed into foster care in the first place." ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- SEIU Local 535, 510-893-8766, www.seiu535.org
- Foster Care Ombudsman, 877-846-1602
- Assembly Human Services Committee, 916-319-2247
- AB 364: www.leginfo.ca.gov