

# El Dorado County Child Welfare System Improvement Plan

May 2009

## Executive Summary

A County System Improvement Plan (SIP) is a required component of the Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability System, referred to as the California-Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR) and developed by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) in accordance with the provisions of Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) 10601.2. This system commenced operation in California in 2004 pursuant to State Law (Assembly Bill 636), proceeds on an ongoing triennial cycle and focuses primarily on measuring outcomes in Safety, Permanence and Child, Youth and Family Well-Being. As a prerequisite to receiving child welfare services funding, local jurisdictions must participate in this evaluation process.

### **Child Welfare Accountability System**

Key components of the accountability system are:

- **Quarterly County Data Reports**

Individual county performance on multiple data indicators is used to measure progress. The data is provided to each county welfare agency and is published online.

- **Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR)**

Each county welfare agency forms teams comprised of its own social workers and probation officers, social workers and probation officers from other counties and CDSS staff to review randomly selected cases in at least one of its identified improvement areas. Teams conduct structured interviews to evaluate the cases.

- **County Self Assessment (CSA)**

In collaboration with community partners and stakeholders, each county identifies its strengths and challenges. The information gathered in the CSA is used to prepare the County System Improvement Plan that is the final required component of the CWS Outcome and Accountability System and is intended to improve CWS outcomes. Reassessments occur in three-year cycles.

- **System Improvement Plan (SIP)**

Based on results of its PQCR and CSA, each county welfare agency collaborates with local partners to develop a plan that identifies key focus areas and specifies improvement goals, strategies and action steps. The SIP represents an operational agreement between the County and the State outlining how the County will improve its system of care for children and youth and forms an integral part of the system for reporting on progress toward meeting improvement goals.

## **El Dorado County 2009 SIP Development Process**

This SIP is the final required component of the CWS Outcome and Accountability System. It delineates strategies that will be used to improve child welfare outcomes in El Dorado County in specific focus areas in which a need for improvement was identified during the PQCR conducted in May 2008 and the 2008-2009 CSA approved by the Board on March 10 2009.

The PQCR brought together key participants from the local child welfare system as well as CWS representatives from other counties to review randomly selected case files to assess local services and identify strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement.

During the CSA process, community input was sought through distribution of a comprehensive survey that asked over sixty community partners and their extended contacts to identify those services they felt generated the best outcomes in the identified focus areas, as well as local barriers to provision of services, and to offer suggestions for service improvements. The CSA incorporated County demographic data; local child welfare services outcomes as compared to federal and state program measures; public agency characteristics, such as the size and structure of public agencies that provide child welfare services in the County; systemic factors, such as case review systems; services available in the County; County-wide prevention activities and strategies, community responses to the CSA survey and results of the PQCR.

The 2009 SIP was developed as required by the El Dorado County Departments of Probation and Human Services in collaboration with CORE Representative and with input obtained through consultation with other local community partners specified by CDSS. The Plan establishes program priorities and defines strategies, actions steps and specific percentage increases expected to be achieved in performance improvement. The SIP is based on information obtained from the PQCR, the CSA and community input.

### **Focus Areas**

The CSA identified three key system focus areas that are addressed in the SIP:

- Recurrence of Maltreatment
- Reentry Following Reunification
- Placement Stability

Strategies identified in the SIP are designed to improve Child Welfare outcomes to meet Federal and State goals. Strategies that address one or all system focus areas include:

- One social worker carrying a referral through the Disposition Hearing
- Fully utilizing the Structured Decision Making tool to assist in referral and case decisions
- Implementation of a team decision making protocol to address certain child welfare issues
- The expansion of family involvement in case planning
- Identifying and focusing on resolving the primary issue causing separation of children and youth from their families
- Limiting the number of services families receive concurrently
- The supervision/discussion of all cases on a regular basis to ensure compliance with regulations and court orders
- Expanded foster family recruitment, especially in the Tahoe Basin and among those foster families that may be able to provide permanency if determined necessary
- Expanded and improved concurrent planning, initiated earlier in the process

## **Challenges**

The current global economic decline and State budget cuts have impacted the County and created uncertainties relative to future funding availability. The concurrent increased need for services exceeds available resources.

Child Welfare Services System issues surrounding social worker retention continue to be problematic, but not unique to El Dorado County. The staff retention issue is limited to social workers and does not extend to other job classifications within the Department of Human Services. Ongoing factors include competing for social workers with other child welfare agencies, particularly in surrounding counties that offer higher salary and benefits and with the non-profit community where caseloads and requirements are not equivalent to those in child welfare services. Department social worker caseloads continue to exceed statewide averages and recommended levels. While training needs and strategies identified in the SIP will continue to be addressed, continuous staff turnover interferes with continuity in training procedure, process and effectiveness.

Additionally, as the economy deteriorates, families face increased stress from loss of income and household stability that can be expected to result in further increases in incidences of neglect or abuse. Caseloads have increased over the past three years and are expected to continue to rise.

## **Conclusion**

Ongoing challenges compromise to some extent the Department's ability to implement and maintain successful strategies for improved outcomes. Implementation of successful strategies to improve CWS outcomes requires creativity, balanced with the reality of declining resources. The Department of Human Services will continue to seek to improve coordination of services, eliminate duplication of services and improve organizational capacity to address these challenges through innovative internal approaches to case staffing and tracking and maximizing limited resources to ensure the best possible outcomes for at-risk children in El Dorado County.