

Reaching Out

CURRENT ISSUES FOR CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

FALL 2008



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Visiting: New Guidelines for Child Welfare Social Workers

By Susan Brooks, Director, Northern California Training Academy, Center for Human Services, UC Davis Extension

Personal, human connections are at the heart of good child welfare practice, and these connections are built through face-to-face visits. Visiting is the way children in out-of-home care and their parents restore and nurture their bonds with each other. It is also the way that social workers build trusting relationships with the children and parents on their caseloads.

Recent findings published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in its regular review of state child welfare outcomes in the Child and Family Services Review for 2001-2004, highlight, for example, the impact of caseworker visits with both children in out-of-home foster/kinship care and with parents. The review found that visits had a significant, positive impact on all three areas of concern in child welfare: safety, permanency and child well-being.

While we all recognize the vital importance of regular visits to build connections with our

vulnerable children, we also recognize that there are legitimate challenges to maintaining regular monthly visiting schedules: (1) caseloads are too high, (2) frequent staff turnover means that children may lose a consistent connection with a social worker, and (3) children are often placed in out-of-county homes due to a lack of foster homes in their local county. This last point often creates challenges for social workers who more than often travel long distances for monthly visits. Our mandate is to look at how we can mitigate these challenges to maintain what we know is good practice.

This issue of Reaching Out looks at "Visiting." The articles inside examine issues surrounding different types of visits—social workers' visits with children in foster care and their parents as well as children in out-of-home care visits with their parents, siblings and other family members.

As always, we hope you find this issue of Reaching Out helpful and informative.



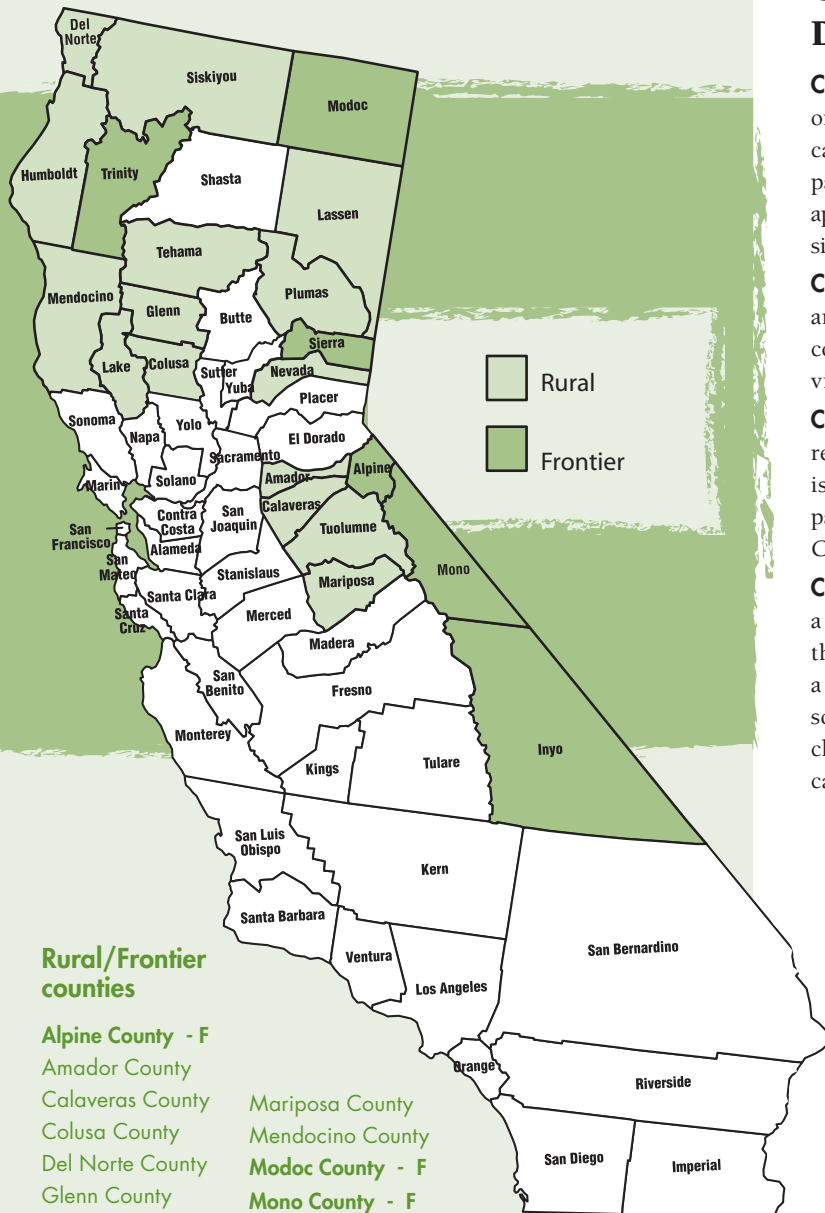
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Rural Counties Defined

The definitions of rural are different depending on who is doing the defining and why. We use the definition of “rural” used by the nationally-renowned *Annie E. Casey Foundation* in its 2004 publication *City and Rural KIDS COUNT Data Book*. That definition is as follows:

“Rural areas are the sparsely settled areas and the small towns outside metropolitan areas. The defined area is county-based: an entire county is either inside or outside a metropolitan area. A metropolitan area has an urban core of at least 50,000 residents... Any county that is not inside a metropolitan area can be referred to as non-metropolitan. All non-metropolitan counties are included as rural.”



Rural/Frontier counties

Alpine County - F

Amador County

Calaveras County

Colusa County

Del Norte County

Glenn County

Humboldt County

Inyo County - F

Lake County

Lassen County

Mariposa County

Mendocino County

Modoc County - F

Mono County - F

Nevada County

Plumas County

Sierra County - F

Siskiyou County

Tehama County

Trinity County - F

Tuolumne County

Clarifying Our Terminology and Definitions

Case-carrying worker: Any caseworker to whom the state or local Title IV-B/IV-E agency has assigned or contracted case management or visiting responsibilities. Within these parameters, the state may determine which caseworkers are appropriate to conduct the visits in accordance with the provisions of the Child and Family Services Improvement Act.

Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006: An amendment to Title IV-B of the Social Security Act. This act contains changes in the federal guidelines for caseworker visits to children in foster care.

CFSR: The Child and Family Services Review. These are regular monitoring reports on states' child welfare outcomes issued by the Children's Bureau, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families.

Coach: In the context of a child welfare family visit, this is a person who can support and encourage the parents, give them information and sometimes correct and teach them. If a child is in placement because the parent needs to change some behavior, a coach can help the parent make that change. Social workers, foster parents or trained volunteers can be visit coaches.

Information from the Population Reference Bureau, Washington D.C., is based on 2000 U.S. Census data



TERMINOLOGY 101

Icebreaker visit: The first meeting between the birth and foster parents of a child placed in care. Facilitated by a caseworker, this information-sharing visit provides an opportunity for birth parents and foster parents to talk about the needs of the child in care. Birth parents can share information about their child and bring some of the child's personal items. Foster parents can ask about the child's routines. Both groups can share information about themselves and their parenting practices.

Inclusive practice: The practice of integrating the birth parent into his or her child's life while the child is in out-of-home foster care. This can include involving the parent in placement decisions, conducting parent-child visits in the parent's home or including the birth parent in events such as a parent/teacher conference, doctors' visit or a child's birthday celebration.

Out-of-home foster/kinship care: The provision of 24-hour care and supervision to children placed by county child welfare services or probation departments in either a state-licensed family or group home, a state-licensed institution or the home of a relative.

Successful visit: A visit between a caseworker and a child in foster care that is purposeful and focuses on issues pertinent to case planning, child safety, permanency and well-being. The caseworker should allow enough time to have a meaningful visit that includes time alone with the child.

Timely visit: Caseworkers are required to visit children in foster care once a month unless the case falls into an exception category.

Visiting: In the context of child welfare, this term can be used to mean a range of different types of visits. These include visits between the caseworker and the child in foster care, the caseworker and the parents, the parents and the child when the child is in out-of-home care, and the child and his/her siblings.

These definitions were drawn from a number of sources including the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, the Children's Bureau, the State of California Child Welfare Manual and an article by Sonya J. Leathers entitled, "Parental Visiting and Family Reunification: How Inclusive Practice Makes a Difference."



The Federal Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 and Its Impact on California's Child Welfare Practices

A new federal mandate

In 2006, the U.S. Congress passed the Child and Family Services Improvement Act, an amendment to Title IV-B of the Social Security Act. This amendment requires that ALL children in any type of out-of-home care (including dual status, FFA, group home and runaway children) must be visited as follows:¹

- at least once a month,
- by their case carrying worker, and
- the visits must be purposeful and focus on issues pertinent to case planning, child safety, permanency and well-being, and
- the majority of those visits should occur in the child's residence.

Each state must track the frequency and location of the visit by its SACWIS system (CWS/CMS). The new federal standards require that states have this type of visit each month with at least 90 percent of the children in care. The tracking of "purposeful and quality visits" is not something that can be done in CWS/CMS; therefore, it must be tracked at the local supervisory level in each agency.

Among other things, the Child and Family Services Improvement Act aims to help states support monthly case-worker visits with children by providing funding specifically to improve caseworker recruitment, retention, training and access to technology.

California's challenge

These regulations are based on research that clearly indicates visits are most successful when the worker who knows the child best conducts regular, planned and focused visits in the child's residence.

While child welfare staff at every level support this good practice, they also acknowledge that most counties in California, particularly rural counties, will have real challenges with these new federal guidelines. Unfortunately, much of what fuels these challenges is related to funding. Inadequate funding has resulted in social worker caseloads that are too high to allow them to do an adequate job, leaving them unable to make the necessary monthly visits. Inadequate funding has also meant that child welfare departments experience a lot of staff turnover—the level of stress and high caseloads leads to burnout and employee dissatisfaction. Also, rural counties in particular don't have adequate placement resources and so often have to place children in foster care in neighboring counties. This puts an additional



strain on completing regular monthly visits. And, while the State of California already requires that caseworkers visit children in foster care once a month, it has not required that the case-carrying social worker always be the one to do the visit, nor that more than half of the visits take place in the child's residence.

California has a number of tasks to complete in response to these new guidelines including defining who can be considered the "case-carrying" social worker and expanding the guidelines for the content of a quality caseworker visit. In the meantime, the state needs to lobby to ensure that appropriate funding from the federal government is included with these new guidelines. The success of the Child and Family Services Improvement Act depends on it.

¹ Children and Family Services Improvement Act 109-3525
www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s109-3525

Achieving Quality, Not Just Quantity, in Foster Care Visits

Since the beginning of government-based foster care practice, caseworkers have been required to visit children placed in out-of-home care, but until recently, these requirements were not specific and not mandated by the federal government. Caseworkers are now challenged to find ways to meet the new federal requirements for foster care visits which, for the first time, includes maintaining a consistent, quality connection with each child.

Recent legislation and subsequent requirements

When the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services did a review of foster care practice in 2005, it found that 50 out of 51 states had statewide minimum standards regarding worker visits with children in care, and 43 states had statewide standards calling for caseworkers to visit children in foster care at least monthly. Additionally, states reported that Children and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), lawsuits, consent decrees and collaboration with child advocacy groups were the most common events contributing to the development or enhancement of their standards.

So why is there so much struggle with this practice when everyone agrees that it is the right thing to do? During the first round of the CFSRs, only 13 states received a rating of “strengths” in the practice. California received a rating of strengths in this practice for its CFSR of 2002 when the cases reviewed showed that 90 percent of the children were visited monthly. However, in 2007 the second CFSR in California revealed that only 57 percent of the cases reviewed indicated that the child was seen monthly.

Defining a quality visit

The legislation provides some insights but does not clearly define a quality visit. Through the eyes of a child, a quality visit might look like the following:

1. I know my caseworker and s/he is committed to helping me adjust to my new foster family and maintain contact with the people important in my life. My caseworker follows through on the commitments made during the visit.
2. I get to have a relationship with an adult whom I trust and know that s/he will not just disappear from my life without saying goodbye.
3. I feel comfortable talking to my caseworker as s/he shows me respect, is empathetic and is genuine in how s/he talks to me. My caseworker does not talk down to me.
4. My caseworker has the ability and responsibility to make case planning decisions and includes me in the decision making process and/or informs me of all decisions that will impact my life.
5. I am asked what things I want to talk about and feel heard when I express my thoughts or opinions.
6. My caseworker gives me his/her undivided attention during the visit. We spend some time alone on each visit, and we had some time just hanging out together doing things I like to do.



7. When I talk to my caseworker, it does not feel like a checklist of questions I must answer. It feels more like a conversation with a trusted friend. S/he remembers what I said on the last visit and the things that make me a unique person.

The supervisor's role in quality visits

It is essential for supervisors and managers to emphasize the reasons visits help children and support the caseworkers in having the time and skills needed to conduct quality visits. Focusing too much on the federal requirements can lead to the quantity being achieved without achieving what is at the heart of this practice—each child feeling that s/he has a caseworker who cares about the child as an individual and is committed to helping the child meet his/her needs.

This practice is also what staff need to consider as their first priority. A recent study on child welfare staff retention found that “Many comments were made about child welfare becoming more influenced by bureaucratic rather than professional concerns.” These bureaucratic changes included a tightened, top-down communications structure, a policy and compliance focus, increased documentation requirements, reduced autonomy in decision making, less competitive salaries, high caseloads and uncompensated work. Supervisors must legitimately address these concerns and work directly with staff to mitigate them.

A frequent comment heard when teaching classes on how to conduct quality visits is, “Spending time with children and developing a professional relationship that makes a difference is why I became a child welfare worker. I wish I could do more of this.” Supervisors need to provide support to workers to have successful, frequent and quality visits that go beyond the “drive-by” or “bed check” visit. Quality visits will lead to better outcomes for children and can even support the retention of caseworkers.

¹ “State Standards and Capacity to Track Frequency of Caseworkers Visits with Children in Foster Care,” D. Levinson, December 2005, OEI-04-03-00350 DHHS

² General findings from the Federal Child and Family Services Review, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/results/genfindings04/genfindings04.pdf>

³ Children's Bureau, *Child and Family Services Reviews Final Report: California 2004 and 2008*

⁴ “Improving Retention Among Public Child Welfare Workers: What Can We Learn from the Insights and Experiences of Committed Survivors?” T. Westbrook, J. Ellis and A. Ellett, *Administration in Social Work*, Vol. 30 (4), 2006

What to Do and Say When a Child Asks an Unanswerable Question

This article originally appeared in the "Permanency Planning Today" newsletter, Summer 2008, published by the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning

A seven year-old child just placed in care asks, "When do I get to go home?"

A caseworker is talking to a 15-year old about permanency and asks the young man if he wants to be adopted. He quickly says, "NO" and walks out of the room.

It is not always easy to talk with a child who is in care, especially when he or she asks questions that cannot be easily answered or resists talking to the worker. We know that having high-quality worker/child contact will help a child be safe and reach timely permanency and will provide the worker with an opportunity to assess the child's well-being. Here are some suggestions on how to address tough questions.

"When can I go home?"

Assure the child that the adults are working to make that decision and the child does not have to be responsible. Young children often believe their actions control adults and therefore need to be reassured on this point. Think about the connection issues that home represents and ask the child questions about those connections on visits. "Who would you like to see? Who do you miss? Can you draw me a picture of your house? What makes it a safe, fun or happy place? What would make where you live right now feel more like a home to you?" Avoid giving the child a long description about the legal timelines or failing to answer the child because you cannot provide a specific date. By exploring the child's view of home, time and what the child wants, it is likely the worker can answer those questions and meet the child's need to maintain connections while in care.

"I don't want to be adopted."

Youth often feel that agreeing to adoption is being disloyal to their parents, or they are afraid to admit they want to be adopted for fear of being rejected. Ask questions such as, "Can you describe an ideal family that would support you having contact with everyone you love? What does "being adopted" mean to you? Is there anything you are afraid will happen if you are adopted?"

For additional resources and other ideas on how to talk to teens about families and permanency, visit: <http://www.rglewis.com/families%20for%20teens%20key%20questions%20sept03.htm>

"What grade are you in?"

"What is your favorite subject?" School-age children think adults are kind of silly for asking these same questions over and over. It can also seem disrespectful to the child that you did not take the time to read or remember facts about the child. If the case is new to you, be sure to learn the basic information about the child before the contact. To learn about how the child is doing at school you may want to ask, "What would be the best/worst thing that could happen at your school? On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the best day ever at school and 1 is the worst, what number describes the type of day you had? Why was it number X? What could happen that would make it one number better?"

"If I am really good, can I go home?"

This may be the child's way of bargaining, a stage of grief and loss. Children often have perceptions that what they did caused them to be placed in foster care. A worker may be tempted to answer. "What you do does not make a difference as to when you go home." Instead, use this as an opportunity to talk about the child's perceptions of foster care, whether the child feels responsible for what occurred or if the child needs help handling grief and loss. "If you go home, what would that be like? What would be the best thing? What might not be so good? It sounds like you are really missing your home. Tell me what you miss the most? What would you do on your first day back at home? What would you do differently when you are back at your home that would make things better? What would your parent do?"

Assessing non-verbal children can be even more difficult. The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning checklist of questions provides suggested questions for the caseworker to use with the foster parents or relative caregivers. Some of these questions include:

What is it like for you to care for this child?

What has been the effect on your family of having this child placed here?

What did you expect it to be like?

Describe who this child is.

What about the child is easiest and most pleasurable?

How has the child changed since coming to live here?

How has the child adjusted to this placement?

These suggestions and many more for how to ask children, youth and caregivers questions based on the developmental age of the child can be found at: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcp/downloads/visitingModule3.pdf>



Suggestions on how to conduct an interview

The worker should observe interactions between the foster parent and child (for children/youth of all ages). Ask the child and caregiver for some time to just observe rather than use the entire time for a formal interview.

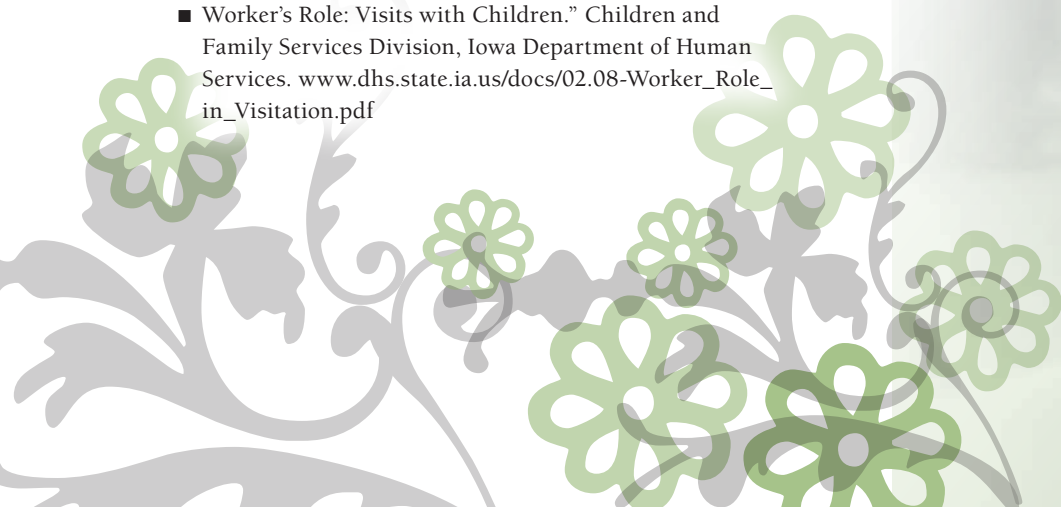
Workers should conduct some of their visit with the child out of sight and sound distance of others. This will allow for the child to share more openly.

Visits should be conducted by a consistent worker, preferably the worker responsible for case planning and case decisions, to encourage the child to know and trust the worker.

Understanding children's developmental ages, how children handle grief, loss and separation, the special needs of abused and neglected children (such as parentified children), and the child's sense of time will help workers be more effective. To achieve the outcomes of safety, permanency and well-being, we must develop a relationship with the child, which requires time and the skill to engage the child in a conversation at his or her developmental level. As one state manager said, the goal is that there be NO "drive by visits." It is not enough to meet the quantity measurement of one contact a month—it is critical to have quality interactions with the child.

Other resources for how to have quality visits with children in care

- Interviewing Children." Rosemary Vasquez, L.C.S.W. CASAnet Resources. www.casanet.org/library/advocacy/interviewing.htm
- Interviewing Children with Disabilities." Northern California Training Academy, University of California, Davis. http://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy/pdf/interview_children_disabilities.pdf
- Talking to Teens in the Justice System: Strategies for Interviewing Adolescent Defendants, Witnesses, and Victims." American Bar Association Juvenile Justice Center Juvenile Law Center, Youth Law Center. Lourdes M. Rosado, Editor. www.njdc.info/pdf/maca2.pdf
- Worker's Role: Visits with Children." Children and Family Services Division, Iowa Department of Human Services. www.dhs.state.ia.us/docs/02.08-Worker_Role_in_Visitation.pdf



Out-of-County Foster Care Placements —What Data on California Counties Reveals

Many child welfare agencies struggle to manage foster care placements in multiple counties. Do all California counties have out-of-county placements? Which ones have the most out-of-county placements? Are rural counties more likely to have children placed in foster care outside of the county than their urban counterparts?

In an analysis of children in child welfare supervised foster care (point-in-time data from January 1, 2008), the following was found:

Of the 72,147 children living in child welfare supervised foster care in California, 78.5 percent of them were placed within their home county.

Children in rural or frontier* counties represented only 2.5 percent of all children in foster care in California—1,790 children in total.

Rural/frontier counties are much more likely to have children placed outside of the supervising county—33.5 percent of cases were out-of-county placements compared to a 21.5 percent out-of-county placement rate statewide.

Frontier counties have more than half of their foster care placements in another county—44.4 percent are placed in-county compared to 78.5 percent placed in-county across all counties.

San Francisco and San Benito are the only two urban counties with more than half of their foster care children placed outside of the supervising county (57.4 percent and 52.2 percent, respectively).

While urban counties have proportionately fewer out-of-county placements than rural/frontier counties, these placements are spread across more counties throughout the state.

Both Alameda and Yolo Counties have foster care children placed in 33 different counties outside of the supervising county—by far the highest number in the state.

* Frontier county: Six or fewer people per square mile.

Data for this article and the table shown here was extracted from the Center for Social Services Research, UC Berkeley website: *Children in Child Welfare Supervised Foster Care, January 1, 2008*.

Stretched Too Thin

California counties must manage foster care placements in multiple counties, not just their own.



The table below shows the number of counties in which foster care placements occur outside of the supervising county.

Alameda	33	Orange	19
Alpine	0	Placer	15
Amador	4	Plumas	17
Butte	27	Riverside	22
Calaveras	9	Sacramento	42
Colusa	8	San Benito	11
Contra Costa	31	San Bernardino	28
Del Norte	13	San Diego	23
El Dorado	24	San Francisco	33
Fresno	21	San Joaquin	29
Glenn	13	San Luis Obispo	18
Humboldt	13	San Mateo	23
Imperial	7	Santa Barbara	15
Inyo	4	Santa Clara	40
Kern	17	Santa Cruz	14
Kings	11	Shasta	25
Lake	22	Sierra	5
Lassen	11	Siskiyou	9
Los Angeles	32	Solano	18
Madera	11	Sonoma	20
Marin	6	Stanislaus	18
Mariposa	6	Sutter	11
Mendocino	26	Tehama	15
Merced	19	Trinity	9
Modoc	1	Tulare	16
Mono	4	Tuolumne	8
Monterey	16	Ventura	10
Napa	7	Yolo	33
Nevada	11	Yuba	15

Making It Work: Social Workers in Rural Counties Get Creative to Make Regular Visits

Busy caseloads. Long travel distances. Rough road conditions. Inclement weather. Together these act as detriments to making regular visits. It is difficult enough for caseworkers to manage regular foster care visits when the children reside in the supervising county, but when placement has occurred outside of the county, social workers must navigate even more hurdles to serve children...especially those in rural counties.

Inyo, a sparsely populated county nestled high in the Sierra-Nevada Mountains, has fewer than 20,000 residents in the entire county, but geographically it's larger than all nine Bay Area counties put together. Marilyn Mann, director of Adult and Children's Services at the Inyo County Department of Health and Human Services, knows a lot about providing care in a rural area.

Mann says, "During the 10 years I've worked in Inyo, there have been times when we've been down to two to three social workers. Staff turnover is always a challenge, so for the monthly social worker visits, we do our best to juggle caseloads, emergency responses, court reports and case management with the placement visits."

This is particularly difficult when placements are in remote locations, sometimes 8-10 hours away. On rare occasions, this does necessitate the use of courtesy supervision; however, Mann recognizes the importance of remaining engaged and providing support to the children in care.

"It is important for the social worker-child connection to remain strong," she says. "This is especially true for our permanent placement kids as we are often the one constant in their lives."

Regarding parent-child visits, Mann notes that many of Inyo's out-of-county placements are a minimum of four hours away, which can limit the frequency of visits to only once a month (although more frequent visits are attempted depending on the age of the child).

"We will transport parents to visits and put them up in a hotel if needed. We will pay for a parent's gas and have FFA [Foster Family Association] supervise. We will sometimes make arrangements for the caregivers to meet us halfway so that we can pick up a child, bring him/her to a visit and then return the child. Each situation is handled individually, and we try to be as creative as possible," Mann explains.

Calaveras, a rural Northern California county in which the largest city has fewer than 5,000 residents, also struggles to maintain regular in-care visits when children are placed outside of the county.

Mikey Habbestad, children's services program manager at Calaveras Works and Human Services Agency, agrees that the biggest challenge with out-of-county placement visits is the amount of time it takes for a social worker to visit just one child (sometimes a full day just to make one visit).

"Our staff has had to get creative about this, especially given the current budgetary climate," Habbestad says. "When we transfer a case from ER to continuing, we are mindful of which continuing unit social workers already have children placed in that geographic region (or any point in between here and there), so they can make multiple visits in one day."

Another tactic Calaveras County implemented is the use of a large dry-erase calendar that social workers use to schedule out-of-county travel so that their colleagues can schedule visits in that area on the same day, and they can ride share (and kudos to Calaveras to resist asking just the one social worker to make the visit in lieu of the case-carrying social worker).

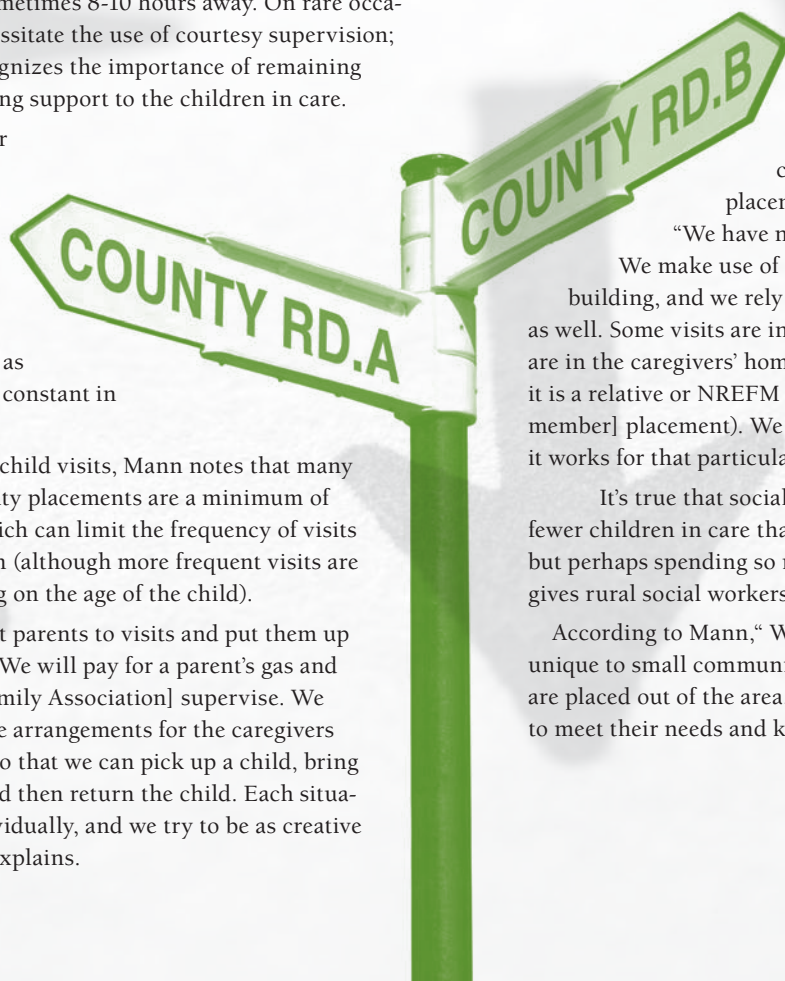
When asked how Calaveras County handles scheduling regular parent-child visits for out-of-county placements, Habbestad explains:

"We have no choice but to make it work..."

We make use of a visitation room in our office building, and we rely on our FFA partners' facilities as well. Some visits are in the parents' homes and some are in the caregivers' homes (albeit less frequently, unless it is a relative or NREFM [non-related extended family member] placement). We do whatever we have to so that it works for that particular parent and child."

It's true that social workers in rural counties have fewer children in care than in more metropolitan areas, but perhaps spending so much time on each foster child gives rural social workers a more vested perspective.

According to Mann, "We have a level of involvement unique to small communities. Even when our children are placed out of the area, we make a strong commitment to meet their needs and keep connected with them."



Parent-Child Visits: Two Strategies on Visit Locations

As mentioned in this newsletter, there are different kinds of visits in child welfare. One type of visiting that social workers must include in their case plan for a child and family is regular visits between parents and their children in out-of-home foster/kinship care. These visits have a number of functions, the main one being to maintain the connection between parents and children who are currently living apart because of child abuse or neglect. These visits also offer social workers the opportunity to observe and assess a parent's parenting skills and to teach parents more positive parenting strategies and techniques. Lastly, they help prepare families for reunification.

Research has shown that these visits have a critical impact on both children and parents. Here are a few parent-child visiting facts from the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning's information packet on Parent-child Visits (Amber Weintraub, 2008):

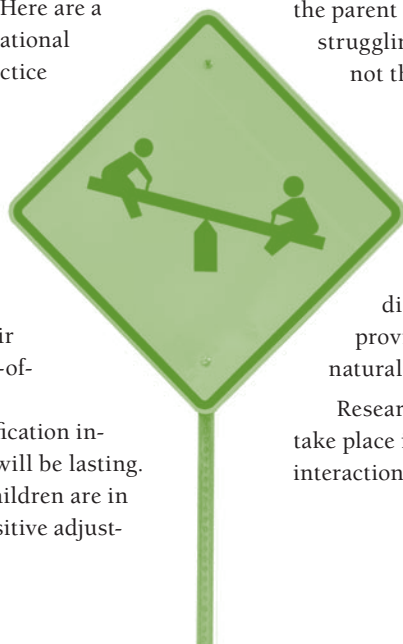
- The chances for reunification for children in care increase tenfold when mothers visit regularly as recommended by the court.
- Children who visit frequently with their parents experience shorter stays in out-of-home placements.
- Frequent visiting prior to family reunification increases the chances that reunification will be lasting.
- Frequent parent-child visiting while children are in care promotes child well-being and positive adjustment to placement.

Social workers have a number of things to consider when writing the case plan for parent-child visits. Aside from the purpose of the visits, social workers need to determine the frequency of visits, the location of visits, how long the visits should be, what activities the visit should involve, the level of supervision the visit requires and who should be at the visit.¹ Social workers should always make each case plan specific to the strengths, needs and situation of the individual family the plan is for.

There are several factors that impact how a social worker determines the above parameters: the child's age, the nature of the abuse/neglect, how long the child has been in out-of-home care and other factors such as any special needs the parent or child may have, whether or not the parent is struggling with addiction and recovery, and whether or not the parent is incarcerated.²

As an example, look at one element of the case plan—the location of the visit—and examine how two different counties in California approach this issue. Best practice dictates that social workers choose visit locations based on what is most comfortable and least disruptive for the child. The location should provide the child with adequate safety and should be natural and home-like.³

Research suggests that the environment in which visits take place is crucial to supporting positive parent-child interactions.⁴



“Visits in the child’s home may be reassuring for the child, allowing the child to see that his or her home is still there, including pets and personal belongings.”



A “homey” visiting center

At the Yuba County Children’s Services Division, child welfare department management staff noticed that many visits between parents and children were taking place in less-than-optimal environments. Often visits were held at the CWS office, a setting that was awkward and uncomfortable for families. There were a number of reasons for why so many parent-child visits were taking place in the office, including a lack of other viable options and convenience. Foster parents were often reluctant to host the visits in their homes.

According to Tony Roach, program manager at Yuba County, the Children’s Services Division was slated to move to a new office space, and an opportunity was presented to also design and build a new family visitation center. This effort to provide a setting that was more responsive to the needs of parents and children during their visits was welcomed by staff and management alike. This center boasts two kitchens where families can prepare food together and a number of “living” areas furnished with comfortable chairs and couches and lots of toys and games, where parents and children can visit and play together.

Additionally, in an effort to further support the parent-child bond and reunification, the center has three staff people, a social worker and two program aides, who work closely with the case-carrying social worker to tailor the visiting plan to the specific strengths and needs of individual families. This staff supervises the visit, coaches parents in setting boundaries and parenting skills and models appropriate parent-child interactions. The center also has a parenting instructor who creates activities for the visit that allow the parent to practice with his or her child what he or she is learning in parenting classes.

Roach shared that, while the family visitation center offers a good alternative to sterile child welfare offices, he did not want to see the center become the sole location for parent-child visits in Yuba County. His division also works with foster parents to help them become more comfortable with both hosting these visits and coaching parents on positive interactions with their children.

Visiting at the family home

San Francisco County is exploring yet another option for visits: holding parent-child visits in the parent’s home whenever possible and appropriate. Many social workers have been reluctant to hold parent-child visits in the home from which the child was removed for a number of reasons including the fact they are concerned about safety issues, and they may be afraid the child will be re-traumatized when the visit ends and the child has to again leave his or her home.

Assuming that holding parent-child visits in the parent’s home does not in any way compromise the child’s safety, there are several arguments for using this strategy. Remembering that the environment in which visits take place is crucial to supporting positive parent-child interactions, the child’s home, despite the abuse or neglect, might be the place where the child feels most at ease. Visits in the child’s home may also be reassuring for the child, allowing the child to see that his or her home is still there, including pets and personal belongings. This home may also be the place where the parent will practice what he or she has to learn to reunify with his or her child. In addition, visiting that occurs in the parent’s home supports family reunification, helping both the parent and child become accustomed to new parenting strategies that have been learned while involved in the child welfare system.

Parent-child visits are an important opportunity for promoting inclusive practice, those efforts by child welfare staff to include parents and families in developing a child’s case plan. Social workers are encouraged to explore different visiting options in an effort to achieve the best permanency outcomes for the children and families they serve.

¹ “Developing a Visitation Plan.” R. Wentz. Northern California Training Academy. 2008.

² *Ibid.*

³ Conversation with Rose Wentz, October 1, 2008.

⁴ “Making visits better: The Perspectives of parents, foster parents and child welfare workers.” Haight, W., Black, J., Mangelsdorf, S., Giorgio, G., Tata, L., Schoppe, S., Szewczyk, M. (2001). Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

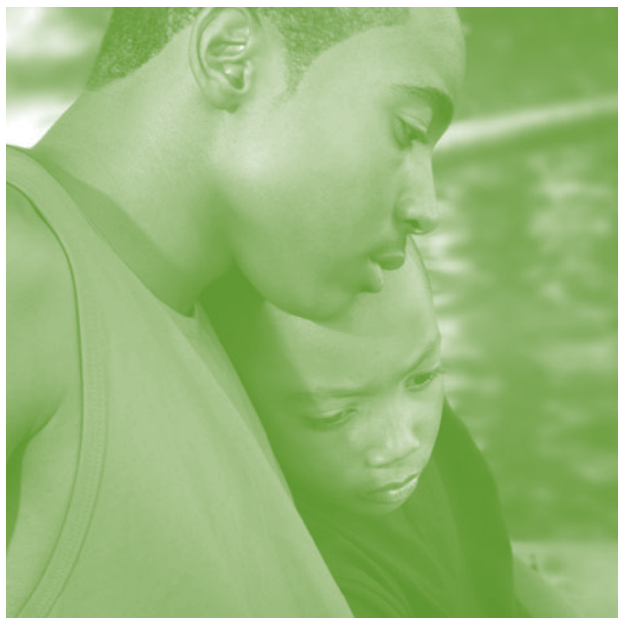


Maintaining the Sibling Bond through Visits

Excerpted from “Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption,” a December, 2006, report by Child Welfare Information Gateway, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families/Children’s Bureau

One of the most critical contributions that child welfare professionals can provide for children who enter care is to preserve their connections with their brothers and sisters. Children who come into foster care or are adopted often are separated from existing or future siblings. Approximately 70 percent of children in foster care in the United States have another sibling also in care (Shlonsky, Elkins, Bellamy, & Ashare, 2005). For a variety of reasons, many of these sibling groups are not placed together.

In a study of California foster children with siblings in care, about 46 percent were placed with all their siblings who were in care, and 66 percent were placed with at least one sibling (Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003).



Make sure that children have full contact information for all their siblings. For instance, providing older siblings with calling cards may facilitate sibling communication.



Maintaining ties between separated siblings

When siblings cannot be placed together, facilitating regular contact is critical to maintaining these relationships. Regular contact may even affect permanency outcomes. Findings from the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) conducted in all states found a strong association between visiting with parents and siblings and the outcomes of reunification, guardianship and placement with relatives (Children’s Bureau, 2004).

States vary considerably in their protection of siblings’ right to contact in statute or child welfare policies. Even states that have extensive statutory protections governing the treatment of siblings who come under court protection often do not offer much protection of the right of siblings to associate with each other if they are not placed together. In the end, workers and foster or adoptive parents have to understand the importance of sibling contact for the children for whom they are responsible in order to maintain their commitment to making these contacts happen.

Strategies for preserving sibling ties in separate placements

Some promising practices from the field suggest ways to maintain ties among separated siblings.

- Place with kinship caregivers who have an established personal relationship. Even when siblings cannot be placed in the same home, they are more apt to keep in close contact if they are each placed with a relative.
- Place nearby. Placing siblings in the same neighborhood or school district ensures that they will be able to see each other regularly. Also, keeping children in their same schools contributes to better educational outcomes.
- Arrange for regular visits. While there is no consensus on frequency of face-to-face contacts, a minimum of twice a month for siblings separated in foster care has been recommended by some experts in the field.
- At least two states (Missouri and Utah) require weekly visits (National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, 2005). Also, visits with birth parents can be arranged to occur at a time when all the siblings can be together.
- Arrange other forms of contact. If the distance between siblings is great, workers need to assist foster and adoptive families in maintaining frequent contacts through letters, email, cards and phone calls. Make sure that children have full contact information for all their siblings; for instance, providing older siblings with calling cards may facilitate sibling communication.
- Involve families in planning. The adults in the siblings' families should be involved with the worker in developing a plan for ongoing contact. This meeting should include working through any barriers to visits, and the plan needs to be reviewed and revised as needed, at least yearly. Sometimes there are value differences between families or other issues that cause parental discomfort with visits. Such differences need to be discussed and resolved.
- Plan joint outings or camp experiences. Siblings may be able to spend time together at summer or weekend camps, including camps specifically for siblings, or through short-term outings. For instance, Camp To Belong is a camp for siblings separated by foster care. Such camp experiences help siblings build and maintain their relationships.
- Arrange for joint respite care. Families caring for siblings may be able to provide babysitting or respite care for each other, thus giving the siblings another opportunity to spend time together.
- Help children with emotions. Sometimes sibling visits stir up emotional issues in children such as the intense feelings they may experience when visiting birth parents. Children need to be helped to express and work through these feelings; this does not mean visits should not occur.

Visits should provide some opportunities for joint Lifebook work with siblings. If siblings are in therapy, they should be seeing the same therapist, and it may be possible to schedule appointments either jointly or back to back. Children may also need help with feelings of guilt if they have been removed from an abusive home but other siblings were left behind or born later.

Encourage sustained contact. Sustaining sibling contact often requires a unique understanding and commitment from parents. Many adoptive parents recognize the importance of their adopted children having contact with siblings living with their birth families or other adoptive families. Some families even travel across the country or to other countries to give their children the opportunity to get to know their siblings. Some States offset the costs of such visits through their adoption subsidy plans. The earlier these relationships can begin, the more children can use these opportunities to work through adoption identity issues that may arise and the sooner they can develop truly meaningful relationships with siblings.

Many states have adoption registries that can help adult siblings separated by foster care or adoption re-establish contact later in life. The caseworker needs to make sure that all pertinent information on each sibling is entered in the registry at the time of each child's adoption.

The full report is available online at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/siblingissues/siblingissues.pdf





Using SafeMeasures to Guide Work with Families

SafeMeasures draws from data entered into CWS/CMS which it then analyzes to provide social workers valuable information regarding families on their caseload.

For example, a report can be easily generated from SafeMeasures that gives information regarding which families need face-to-face visits for the current and upcoming months. This information proves extremely valuable when social workers, at the start of each month, are faced with 20 families that need face-to-face contact. SafeMeasures helps them prioritize which child or parent needs a visit within the next week versus the family that can wait until the end of the month.

Additionally, SafeMeasures will automatically remind the child welfare worker which children have waivers and when their next visit is due. SafeMeasures also provides reports regarding families who have not received timely visits, thus moving those families up the list of priorities. CWS/CMS is filled with valuable information regarding children and families, SafeMeasures is the tool that helps social workers utilize this wealth of information and prioritize their daily duties, and the time-saving advantage is huge—SafeMeasures reports are easily and reliably generated within seconds. Visit “My Caseload” in SafeMeasures to start using this tool right away.

The Academy is currently offering four classes in SafeMeasures:

SafeMeasures® Navigation

SafeMeasures (offered as a half-day training in navigation skills) has demonstrated the capability to substantially improve county child welfare performance on key process and outcome measures. These important gains are observed when staff uses SafeMeasures consistently and incorporates it into their operations.

Use SafeMeasures to:

- assess whether or not federal, state and local requirements are being met
- track agency, unit and worker performance over time
- monitor workload
- identify out-of-compliance cases
- track SDM measures

For example, SafeMeasures tracks whether:

- in-person investigations are being initiated within the required time frame
- case plans are being approved within the recommended number of days
- monthly case contacts are being made

This half-day training focuses on learning basic navigation skills. This training provides a great opportunity for those who are new as well as those who have used SafeMeasures.



Social Work Organizational Strategies: Using SafeMeasures and Other Tools

This full-day training provides ideas and strategies for social workers to improve overall organization and productivity and support them in effectively and successfully using SafeMeasures.

Topics covered in this training relate to habits and practices that result in effective organization using tools such as CWS/CMS, SafeMeasures, SMART Objectives and Outlook.

Advanced SafeMeasures® for Supervisors

This skills-based training begins with a brief refresher of basic SafeMeasures navigation. Participants will become familiar with one sample report including thorough understanding of the meaning of the reported data and the implications for practice. Strategies for using the data proactively to improve their unit's performance are reviewed. Proactive strategies for a number of key reports are then discussed. Proactive use is the guiding theme; the goal is to help supervisors use SafeMeasures to prevent non-compliance from occurring. Finally, each supervisor will develop his/her own usage plan for SafeMeasures. These plans, typically based on the county's SIP goals, identify about three priority SafeMeasures reports. The supervisor will monitor and establish specific action steps that will be followed using the data to improve performance.

Advanced SafeMeasures for Managers

This skills-based training begins with a brief refresher of basic SafeMeasures navigation. Participants will become familiar with one sample report including thorough understanding of the meaning of the reported data and the implications for practice. Each manager will develop his/her own usage plan for SafeMeasures. These plans are typically based on the county's System Improvement goals identifying about three priority SafeMeasures reports. Managers become familiar with the dashboard and mapping tools available on SafeMeasures.

For information about SafeMeasures training in your county or for coaching previously trained staff, please call Hilary Wilkoff at the Northern California Training Academy at 530-757-8807.

Additional Resources

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

701 St. Paul Street
Baltimore, MD 21202
410-547-6600
www.aecf.org

The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare

Chadwick Center for Children and Families, Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego
3020 Children's Way, MC 5017, San Diego, CA 92123
www.cachildwelfareclearinghouse.org

Center for Social Services Research

School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley
120 Haviland Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-7400
(510) 642-1899
<http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports>

"Child Welfare Caseworker Visits with Children and Parents: Innovations in State Policy"

National Conference of State Legislatures

444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 515
Washington, D.C. 20001
202-624-5400
www.ncsl.org

Child Welfare Information Gateway

Children's Bureau/ACYF
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20024
800.394.3366
www.childwelfare.gov

Children's Voice newsletter, July/August 2007

Child Welfare League of America

www.cwla.org/voice/0707briefs.htm

"Findings From the Initial Child and Family Services Reviews, 2001–2004"

Administration for Children and Families

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/results/index.htm

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning

Hunter College School of Social Work
129 East 79th Street
New York, NY 10075
Phone: 212/452-7053
www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp

Reports on Caseworker Visits with Children in Foster Care: OEI-04-03-00350 and OEI-04-03-00351 (December 2005)

Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General

<http://oig.hhs.gov>

"Parent-Child Visits" in Children's Services Practice Notes newsletter: (Vol. 5, No. 4. October 2000)

North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/Cspn/vol5_no4.htm

"Standing up for Separate Sibling"

Connect for Kids website, published May 15, 2006

www.connectforkids.org/node/4197

Other resources for how to have quality visits with children in care

"Interviewing Children." **Rosemary Vasquez**, L.C.S.W. CASA-net Resources.

www.casanet.org/library/advocacy/interviewing.htm

"Interviewing Children with Disabilities." **Northern California Training Academy**, University of California, Davis.

http://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy/pdf/interview_children_disabilities.pdf

"Talking to Teens in the Justice System: Strategies for Interviewing Adolescent Defendants, Witnesses, and Victims."

American Bar Association Juvenile Justice Center Juvenile Law Center, Youth Law Center. Lourdes M. Rosado, Editor.

www.njdc.info/pdf/mac2.pdf

"Worker's Role: Visits with Children." **Children and Family Services Division**, Iowa Department of Human Services.

www.dhs.state.ia.us/docs/02.08-Worker_Role_in_Visitation.pdf

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Nurses Symposium

Coming in spring 2009. Check our website for details.

Finding Families: Family Search and Engagement

Coming January 26-27 (managers and supervisors) in Davis and January 28 in Redding. Check our website for details.

Research to Practice Roundtables

Various subjects in several locations. See our website or the spring course catalog for details.

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*We can't publish this
newsletter without you.*

We received lots of helpful and interesting feedback on our last issue. Please send your comments and any ideas for future issues to me at sbrooks@unexmail.ucdavis.edu.



In Our Next Issue

Look for more articles, research,
success stories and resources
in our next issue of **Reaching Out**.

The next issue will focus on
Concurrent Planning.

About the Northern California Training Academy

As part of the Center for Human Services at UC Davis Extension, the Northern California Training Academy provides training, technical assistance and consultation for 29 Northern California counties. The counties include rural and urban counties with various training challenges for child welfare staff. The focus on integrated training across disciplines is a high priority in the region. This publication is supported by funds from the California Department of Social Services.

About The Center for Human Services

The Center began in 1979 with a small grant to train child welfare workers in northern California. It has grown to become an organization that offers staff development and professional services to public and private human service agencies throughout the state. The Center combines a depth of knowledge about human service agencies, a standard of excellence associated with the University of California, extensive experience in developing human resources and a deep dedication to public social services.

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