



**REPORT OF  
PEER QUALITY CASE REVIEW  
CONDUCTED FOR  
CHILD WELFARE SERVICES  
and  
PROBATION  
IN  
HUMBOLDT COUNTY**

On-Site Peer Quality Case Review Dates:  
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Final Report

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## PEER QUALITY CASE REVIEW

Pursuant to State Law (Assembly Bill 636, Steinberg, Ch. 678, Statutes of 2001), effective January 2004, a new Child Welfare Services Outcome and Accountability System began operation in California. The new system, referred to as the California-Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR), was developed in accordance with the provision of WIC §10601.2 and focuses primarily on measuring outcomes in safety, permanence and child and family well-being. The new system replaces the former Child Welfare Services Oversight System which focused exclusively on regulatory compliance and brings California's oversight into alignment with the Federal Child and Family Service Review oversight system of the states.

There are four Components to the Outcomes and Accountability System:

1. Quantitative data is reviewed through **Quarterly Reports** based on CWS/CMS data.
2. Qualitative data is obtained through the Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR) since CWS/CMS can only measure data and not obtain practice patterns. PQCR is a way to obtain this qualitative information from the Child Social Worker (CSW) and Supervising Child Social Worker (SCSW) perspective in structured interviews. PQCR can help identify inconsistencies between offices and is completed **every three years**.
3. Self Assessment is completed **every three years**. Each county submits a comprehensive analysis of how they are performing on outcomes using the Quarterly Reports and the PQCR.
4. System Improvement Plan (SIP) report to CDSS detailing how the county intends to improve its performance for areas needing improvement, completed **every three years**.

One purpose of PQCR is to provide an understanding of actual practices in the field, for both social workers and probation. Another is for agencies to better understand and assess their organizational support and structures that affect workers' ability to do their best work with children and families in the areas of Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being.

PQCR is a state/ county partnership: it is not done "to" counties; it is done "with" counties. PQCR is guided by questions raised by analysis of outcome data and system factors. PQCR is an in-depth qualitative problem analysis of social work practice by social work professionals and Probation Officers, intended to examine and explore actual practice. PQCR uses an interactive process with workers.

Child Welfare Services (CWS) Redesign changes the way CWS is administered. It promotes collaboration and non-adversarial relationships, and calls on a network of agencies, service providers, and families within the community. To that end, Humboldt County included local Tribes and Community Based Organizations in the focus groups.

## **A. PURPOSE**

The purpose of Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR) is to provide a rich and deep understanding of actual practices in the field by bringing in outside expertise to help shed light on the strengths and challenges for County Child Welfare Services (CWS) delivery systems and social work practices. For Probation, the goal of the PQCR is to identify key patterns of agency strengths and concerns for youth in out-of-home care. Both agencies benefit by using peer reviewers that can offer objectivity to the process. The PQCR is an extension of the county's Self-Assessment (SA) process and is an integral part of a complete review. Both the PQCR and SA inform the county's System Improvement Plan (SIP).

## **B. SCOPE**

A representative sample of cases receiving child welfare and probation services was selected for the PQCR process to provide an in-depth, qualitative examination of Social Worker and Probation Officer practice in the focus area. The selected focus area was Relative/Non-Related Extended Family Member (R/NREFM) placements related to reunification.

The decision to focus on this area was made after completing an extensive Literature Review to ascertain what, if any, differences exist in outcomes for children placed with kin and in non-kin foster care. The three major goals of child welfare are: protection for children, support for families, and permanent homes. Permanency issues include: reunification with biological parents, adoption, and legal guardianship. While our knowledge about kinship care is underdeveloped, its potential contribution, when appropriately supported and implemented, is already indicated to be considerable. As a system of care, it is also most sympathetic to the ideal of family preservation.

The Humboldt County 2005 SIP identified four focus areas including "Increasing the number of Foster Care Placements with Relatives and Non-Relative Extended Family Members." The 2005 SIP demonstrated the County's current performance regarding children placed with relatives. The number of placements with relatives or non-related extended family members was above the state average. Children placed in out-of-home care who had a primary placement with a R/NREFM was 38%. The state of California was 35.7%. Initial placements with

R/NREFM were also above the state average. Humboldt County's initial placement with a R/NREFM was 23.9%, with the state average at 17.4 %. The Self-Assessment team nevertheless determined this is an area that should continue to show improvement. Following the PQCR, Humboldt County will complete a new Self-Assessment and the Three-Year System Improvement Plan will be due in January 2007.

## **C. METHODOLOGY**

The methodology for the PQCR utilized information obtained from case files, Social Worker and Probation Officer interviews, and from five focus groups: Social Workers/ Probation Officers (two groups), Social Worker/ Probation Supervisors, Tribes, and Community Based Organizations (called Community Partners).

Humboldt County CWS and Probation conducted their PQCR reviews concurrently. Six individuals were invited to participate on the interview panels. There were two interview panels consisting of a probation officer from Lassen County, an Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) advocate from the Table Bluff Reservation, a community member, an experienced (but newly hired) CWS social worker from Humboldt County, a Social Worker III from the Karuk Tribe of California, and a retired annuitant Social Worker from Shasta County. Due to weather and logistics, the Shasta County Social Worker was unable to participate and the California Department of Social Services PQCR facilitator filled the remaining interview team member position.

The PQCR committee was co-chaired by the Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Compliance and Quality Assurance Administrator and a CWS Program Manager.

PQCR orientation was conducted by the University of California at Davis Extension Northern Regional Training Academy (NRTA) representatives for the interview team members and support staff (DHHS Compliance and Quality Assurance Administrator and Analyst). Training for the interview teams was facilitated by the same representatives. NRTA conducted the five focus groups and the interview team debriefing sessions.

The Social Worker and Probation Officer interviews took place at the same time as the focus groups. Interviews were conducted using the Social Worker Interview Tool (Attachment 1), Probation Officer Interview Tool (Attachment 2), and the Focus Group Tools (Attachments 3-6). Information gathered during the interviews was put into the debrief matrix (Attachment 7) by interview team

members and then transferred into a final matrix by clerical staff provided by the Social Services Branch (SSB) of Humboldt County Health and Human Services.

The last day of the PQCR process, members of SSB Administration, Probation, DHHS Compliance and Quality Assurance, CWS Social Workers, and Probation Officers attended a PQCR "Celebration". Aggregated information was presented from the PQCR process by the NRTA, outlining recurring themes, trends, patterns, strengths, challenges, barriers, training issues, and recommendations.

## **HUMBOLDT COUNTY INFORMATION**

Humboldt County began Phase I of the Health and Human Services Agency assisted Integrated Services Initiative in February 1999 through the legislation of Assembly Bill 1259. In 2004 Assembly Bill 1881 authorized continuation of Humboldt County's transformational work. Our Phase II (2005-2009) Organizational efforts "build" on Phase I Organizational restructuring efforts towards increasing the Department's infrastructure needed for the development of Centralized Program Structures and processes that are required to support the systemic transformations toward integrated service delivery across the Department's three branches (Mental Health, Social Services, Public Health) and its Community Stakeholders.

Humboldt County covers 3572 square miles. The county is rural with a population density of 35.4 persons per square mile (2000 United States Census). The state average population density in 2000 was 217.2 people per square mile. The 2000 Humboldt County population was 126,518. In 1999 the percentage of the Humboldt County population that was below the poverty level was 19.5% as compared to the state percentage of 14.2%.

## **CASE SELECTION:**

Case sampling was not statistically valid. CWS cases were identified in collaboration with the Children's Research Center (CRC). Case sampling was limited to the review period of 1/1/04 to 12/31/04. Initially 21 cases were identified by CRC as meeting Humboldt's focus area. After review of the cases Humboldt's list was reduced to 7 cases that were either on-going or closed and has an assigned Social Worker still employed with CWS. Six cases were selected for CWS. Probation selected cases from their open files. The intention of the case selection process for Probation and CWS was to identify some cases that had relative placement and some that did not to compare the current practices in the field. The final selection of cases for CWS resulted in fewer relative placement cases, not the anticipated 50%, but 33%. This reduction was noted by the interview panels.

Six cases were selected for Social Worker interviews and two cases were selected for Probation Officer interviews. One case review did not take place due to the Social Worker's schedule. Another Social Worker was on vacation the day of the PQCR review and the Social Worker Supervisor was interviewed for the case utilizing the Interview Tool that had been completed by the Social Worker.

## **D. SUMMARY OF DATA**

### DOCUMENTATION TRENDS CWS/CMS

Social Workers found that appropriate use of the Child Welfare Services/ Case Management System was a consistent documentation trend. The use of Structured Decision Making, at appropriate times, such as prior to the development of the case plan and court reports was also identified as a documentation trend.

### PROMISING PRACTICES

Social Workers, in one of the two teams, identified several areas as promising practices including; the engagement of clients and families through a strength-based model, the numerous beneficial training opportunities, good identification of relatives for placement, utilizing the child's input when developing the case plan, review of relative placements, and utilization of community service providers in the case plan.

Social Workers in the other team identified the following promising practices: community services, such as Bridge House, using Probation as a resource, multiple attempts to engage the mother as well as the level of services provided to her, use of Structured Decision Making, the use of blending (connection of case plan) to address safety issues and family needs, and working closely with supervision.

Probation Officers also identified staffing with a panel of supervisors, involving the Tribes, searching for the "good" placement and providing services that addressed safety and risk issues as promising practices.

Focus Groups identified Team Decision Making (TDM) as "the promise and the hope." They also noted that CWS supervision is very supportive of R/NREFM placements and that consistent review of cases, by supervisors, to this issue will support promising practices. The Courts and Judges were identified as being supportive of R/NREFM placements. It was noted that the Judges also understood ICWA, though attorneys did not. The Kinship Emergency Fund was identified as a promising practice as well as the involvement of Public Health Nurses in TDM. Public Health was also noted as a promising practice through the Alternative Response Team (ART).

Humboldt County has implemented six Evidence-Based Practices (EBP) to improve the outcome areas of California Child and Family Services Review and Child Welfare Improvement Activities. Humboldt County is committed to utilizing EBP where available in prevention, early intervention, and treatment strategies. The Team Decision Making component of one EBP, Family to Family, was identified through the PQCR process and an outstanding promising practice and is included on the following table with other identified promising practices.

<b>Promising Practice</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Impact on R/NREFM Placements</b>
Family to Family/ Team Decision Making (TDM)	Evidence-based practice that develops family resources for families whose children are in or at risk of out-of-home placements	Contributes to fewer placements and moves, resulting in less disruptions for children
Alternative Response Team (ART)	Partner program with Public Health Department/ Child Welfare Services. Provides parents/ guardians with parenting, medical, home visit, housing, and transportation support	Provides family support and promotes family stability through interventions and assistance services
Kinship Emergency Fund	Small fund available to assist kinship placements	Provides resource/ support for kinship caregivers
Supervisor Support and Review	To consider R/NREFM placements	To better ensure the proper placement of children with R/NREFM
Court Support	In regards to Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) court proceedings/ relative placement	Judges support R/NREFM placements
Public Health Nurse Involvement	Partnership through ART	Working with families of children under 8 years to provide support and promote family stability
County Staff Trainings	UC Davis and North Coast Regional Training Academy strength-based practice trainings	Multiple opportunities for Social Workers and Probation Officers to improve existing skills and develop new skills around strength-based case planning
Relative Searches	Identification and location of a potential placement pool	Provides more opportunities for children to stay connected with their family members
Bridge House	Transitional housing with intensive case management in a clean and sober environment	Supports reunification process, provides family support, promotes unity, and smoother transition to independent living
Tribal Involvement	Improved communication and working relationships	Provides another resource for identifying R/NREFM, which results in increased R/NREFM placements

## **E. SUMMARY OF PRACTICE**

### **IDENTIFIED BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES**

Social Workers identified several barriers and challenges, among them: lack of a larger pool of potential relatives for placement opportunities, lack of residential treatment programs in Humboldt County, lack of suitable foster homes in the county, lack of service providers to address sexual offender issues, language and cultural issues with non-English speaking families, and timeframe limitations due to the age of children and caseload size.

Probation Officers also identified numerous barriers and challenges: frequent turnover in Probation Officers, lack of respite care for relative caregivers, counselors missing sessions, lack of parental involvement.

Focus Groups participants included: Community Based Organizations (CBO), local Tribes, Social Workers, Probation Officers, and supervisors. They developed a list of barriers and challenges and they are presented in aggregate. Significant time may be required to identify and locate R/NREFM and reconnect families especially if there have been prior issues like substance abuse. More staff are needed specializing in R/NREFM placements. For Probation, placement with R/NREFM may conflict with the need to remove youth from peer influence. Some R/NREFM placements may be excluded due to economic issues and criminal history restrictions, more flexibility was suggested. There are childcare and respite needs for R/NREFM caregivers. There was an identified need for more community based resources for both youth and families as well as more diverse geographic resources in the outlying areas. While Humboldt County is planning for an ICWA Specialist, the Social Worker has not yet been hired pending the graduation of the 2006 Humboldt State University Master of Social Work cohort. There is some confusion regarding overlapping tribal jurisdictions, especially around placements with sub-tribes. Tribal homes don't always meet the state and county criteria for R/NREFM placements and may not qualify for some funding. There was some discussion regarding difficulty with getting payment and services for R/NREFM placements which creates trust issues.

### **TRAINING NEEDS**

Social Workers/ Probation Officers both identified the only issue that needed training was in the area of R/NREFM training.

Focus Groups identified several issues regarding training needs. They asked for accessible and available training for R/NREFM placements (with refresher trainings periodically), maybe on PowerPoint to answer questions, build trust, encourage participation so the CBOs are more prepared to deal with difficult children and challenging situations. Other trainings identified were: highlight

priority of R/NREFM placements, how to handle medically fragile children and how/ when to involve nurses in assessing R/NREFM homes for medical safety issues, cultural/ lifestyle diversity training, train R/NREFM the same as foster parents, and to train new workers that R/NREFM placements are not the same as foster placements. The final need is for more ICWA training.

#### SYSTEMIC AND POLICY CHANGES

Social Workers would like to be scheduled for less “on call” time. Social Workers identified the desire for a Team Approach to case management and the reduction of caseload size to provide time for Social Workers to meet with service providers and clients. They also mentioned the need for smoother and more timely approval of payment for services. An enormous help would be to develop and maintain a current list of all relatives in the physical case for ease of access.

Probation Officers identified the need for more collaboration with other agencies and foster parents. Probation would like to have more education regarding R/NREFM support system availability.

Focus Groups suggested coordination of protocols with CalWorks to maximize resources for R/NREFM placements, prioritizing R/NREFM for childcare and/or substitute R/NREFM for parent in existing childcare. Some participants thought the regulations were too restrictive, especially regarding criminal background checks and licensing requirements. The county needs to coordinate with all applicable Tribes to maximize opportunities to place child in accordance with ICWA requirements. There was discussion of cultural differences with respect to home assessments.

#### RESOURCE ISSUES

Several resource issues were identified by Social Workers: lack of residential treatment facilities for minors in the county, desire for more Social Worker and clerical staff, lack of foster homes trained to meet the special needs of children, lack of sexual offender treatment program, and not enough time to locate extended family/ community services for families.

Probation Officers identified three resource issues: they need more staff, respite care for foster parents, and smaller caseload size.

Focus Groups mentioned the desire for a grandparent support group and respite care, more services for R/NREFM following initial placement (like effective parenting classes), and a 24/7 Hotline to support R/NREFM facing a crisis situation with a child in care.

## AREAS NEEDING STATE TRAINING ASSISTANCE

Social Workers suggested more ICWA and cultural competency training for workers. Focus Groups suggested that the state review the criminal history restrictions since it is felt that some relatives are currently unnecessarily excluded.

## F. RECOMMENDATIONS

The two interview teams had recurring recommendation themes that included; increased staffing levels, lower caseloads and better use of practitioner's time, specific to clerical tasks.

The first team, which consisted of Social Workers only, had specific recommendations which included;

- create teams of Social Workers to staff the more difficult cases,
- reduce the stringent background checks that eliminate placements with appropriate homes,
- improve ways to identify more family members including fathers very early on in the case and create a database to store the information,
- improve the services payment approval process to make it more timely,
- continue to expand the use of TDM,
- create opportunities for increased collaboration between Family Reunification and Permanency Placement Social Workers,
- increase the cultural awareness of Social Workers and CWS, and
- reduce the stress that after hours (on-call) adds to the job.

The second team, which included Probation Officers and Social Workers, made recommendations to;

- hold parents accountable for participation in their child's life inclusive of school, counseling and medical needs,
- increase the collaboration between Probation and CWS similar to the Family Intervention Team model,
- increase the use of TDM,
- develop more coordinated care for families and children,
- develop a Foster Parent collaborative for Probation, and
- increase the knowledge and use of support services for relative placements.

Several recommendations were brought forth from the Focus Groups. The Community Based Organizations envisioned developing a DVD that includes real life scenarios and demonstrates various ways for CBO staff to respond to situations. The CBO focus group participants would like to require CBOs to share materials and resources with each other so that clients can get referred to

appropriate services. Lastly, the CBOs would like to use the CWS/Probation case plan to coordinate all aspects of the child/family individual situation and coordinate services with one case plan.

The CWS/Public Health/Behavioral Health Focus Group recommended involving Public Health Nurses in Team Decision Making. It was also suggested to create user-friendly handout for R/NREFM explaining timelines, finances and other practical information. The handout would need to include contact name and phone number for initial information and follow-up on financial payment. Additionally, members of this focus group suggested that Public Health create a handout on issues/care relating to drug exposed infants as this presents a challenge for care providers. Lastly, develop an assessment tool to determine what could have been improved when R/NREFM placements fail.

The Supervisor Focus Group recommended a “Cooling Off” location (assessment center) for a short period of time after removal of a child to set up a family meeting and explore available options. Also, develop an informational orientation for R/NREFM and provide community activity resources in which the child may participate.

The Tribal Focus Group recommended pursuing enhanced rates for foster care (e.g. FFA rate) for tribal homes servicing children with intense needs.

Probation recommended more collaboration, especially regarding R/NREFM searches and increased respite care for foster parents. Probation plans to utilize local experts to train juvenile probation officers how to conduct a relative placement search. Probation will consider transitioning some cases in foster care or group homes to a Probation Officer in the Family Reunification Unit, in an effort to consolidate out-of-home placement cases and to reduce other caseloads.

Poor parental participation was identified as an area of concern. Probation will work with the Court to encourage more parent/family participation in planning for placement as well as preparing for transition home. Probation will review the allocation of resources to facilitate probation’s participation in the TDM process.

## **G. CONCLUSION**

Overall, the PQCR provided a valuable forum for evaluation of current practice and an opportunity to share information to improve outcomes. The planning process for the PQCR was extensive with weekly phone conferences, multi-disciplinary planning and coordination among CWS staff and Probation.

Through an extensive review and edit process in the development of the interview tools, Humboldt County had anticipated that valuable information specific to individual Social Worker and Probation Officer practice would be generated. This was not the case, though through the incorporation of general case practices, we were able to make conclusions on best practices.

Humboldt County CWS experienced challenges around case selection and Social Worker availability for the individual interviews. Cases were selected based on which Social Worker was currently employed with the agency during the case selection period. This illustrates the high turn-over rate of Social Workers. Although the information obtained from the Social Workers was valuable, much of it did not fall within the context of effective practice. Because of the small sample size, we knew in advance that the information would not be quantitative.

The one key factor which the PQCR process clearly identified was that the use of Team Decision Making, which can occur very early in cases and brings together family and community, will continue to strengthen and increase R/NREFM placements within Humboldt County.

Humboldt County is implementing one of the consistently recommended changes within CWS specific to the use and allocation of clerical staff. Through the transfer of maintaining cases, including filing, from Social Workers to the clerical unit, Social Workers will have more time to devote to R/NREFM placements.

Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services Child Welfare Services will utilize the information gathered from the PQCR process to assist in updating the SIP and planning future improvements to social work practice with improved outcomes for clients and families.