

County supervisors begin in-depth look at child-welfare system

By **Anne Ternus-Bellamy** From page A1 | July 31, 2016

WOODLAND — Yolo County supervisors have begun what one expert called a “remarkable” in-depth examination of the county’s child-welfare services program, with workshops, interviews, analysis and more that will continue well into the fall — all with the goal of determining how best to serve Yolo children at risk for abuse and neglect.

The Board of Supervisors has contracted with the Child Family Policy Institute of California to evaluate the county’s child-welfare system over the next several months, reporting back to the board regularly and holding four public workshops.

The institute’s executive director, Stuart Oppenheim, said Tuesday the approach is unique.

“We work with all 58 counties and we haven’t heard of a board taking this exceptional level of interest in what is a very complex system,” Oppenheim told county supervisors during a nearly three-hour workshop last week.

“(W)e as child-welfare professionals often regret that the community at large, the policy-makers, don’t really spend enough time to really look at what’s going on in the system and how they as a larger community can work together to make it the best system possible.

“Your level of interest ... is extremely gratifying,” he added.

Yolo County’s interest is personal to one supervisor, Matt Rexroad of Woodland, who got the ball rolling back in March when he called for significant changes to the way the county decides whether to return foster children to their biological parents or guardians.

Rexroad argued that the county seeks reunification at every opportunity without considering the best interest of the child.

He spoke from experience, as he and his wife had gone to court to prevent their foster child from being returned to what they believed was an unsafe home.

The effort was not successful but Rexroad said his experience made clear “we’ve got some big problems here in Yolo County.”

The primary issue: “The drive for reunification at all costs has basically infected our system,” Rexroad said.

The process

Under state and federal law, reasonable efforts must be made to reunify families after a child has been removed. California code specifically states that whenever a child is removed from the custody of a parent or guardian, the court shall order the social worker to provide reunification services to the parent.

However, there are 17 exceptions allowing for the reunification process to be bypassed. Exceptions include when the parent or guardian is suffering from a diagnosed mental disability that renders him or her incapable of utilizing reunification services; when the parent or guardian has caused the death of another child through abuse or neglect; when the child is being removed for a second time for physical or sexual abuse; and where there has been severe sexual abuse or infliction of severe physical harm to the child or a sibling.

In order to bypass reunification in a given case, the social worker must make a recommendation to the court and the court makes the final decision. Rexroad has said he believes bypass is not being sought when it should be.

At a March Board of Supervisors meeting, he suggested that the board approve language that the county would seek bypass whenever possible.

But County Counsel Phil Pogledich told the board while supervisors may exercise general direction and supervision of the director of health and human services — who has the final say on whether to recommend a bypass of reunification — supervisors cannot control how the director does her day-to-day job.

Additionally, the social workers who work beneath the director act as an impartial arm of the court in dependency proceedings, Pogledich noted, and their duties include providing the court with their own recommendations on whether reunification services would be in the best interest of the child.

“That a social worker has to recommend bypass without regard to the best interest of the child ... that I think goes too far,” Pogledich said. “It conflicts with social workers’ duties under state law.”

State law covered

At Tuesday’s workshop, Oppenheim and other representatives of the Child Family Policy Institute spent a couple of hours explaining state law on child welfare, as well as federal and case law and the history of child welfare in the United States.

Rexroad and other supervisors, meanwhile, raised a number of issues likely to be discussed at three future workshops after the institute has studied Yolo County’s system further.

Among the issues Rexroad raised were differences he perceives among social workers in how standards are applied in determining the likelihood of abuse or neglect.

“I believe those standards are applied very subjectively,” Rexroad said. “In my personal experience, I see differences among the social workers ... based on personality or whatever.”

Another issue, he said, is a reunification process that doesn’t adequately gauge whether a parent has made the necessary changes to create a safe home environment.

“I don’t think our programs are really substantially changing anyone at all,” he said.

Parents may go through domestic violence training, Rexroad said, and receive a certificate of completion, “but our data shows with domestic violence training ... it doesn’t work. It doesn’t change anything ... the recidivism is the same.”

Additionally, he said, “If your behavior change is to stop beating a child and we took the child away and you haven’t had a chance to beat it in the intervening 18 months, OK, great. You didn’t beat that child.”

Supervised visitation at which a social worker can watch the parent and child interact, he added, doesn’t take into account situations where abuse might be most likely to occur.

“Even I can care for a child in the middle of the day, when it’s bright and sunny and we’re going to the park,” he said. “Caring for a child a 3 o’clock in the morning after they’ve been screaming for four hours is totally different set of circumstances. And if you have a history of abusing and neglecting a child, that’s when that behavior is going to come out. It’s not going to come out at the park.”

County outcomes

Oppenheim and his colleagues will be examining Yolo County’s practices and outcomes and will return to the board for a second workshop in September, at which time they will address supervisors’ concerns.

Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis noted that “at the board level, we’re policy-makers, not in the day-to-day decision-making, but it does strike me where there are judgment calls ... or exercise of discretion, the ethic I would want is to be as protective of children as we can be.

“So that’s not telling anyone to not follow the law or not follow the standards, but to know that this board values the children most. Sometimes when it gets reduced to a manual or procedures, that gets lost and I don’t want it to get lost.”

Rexroad, meanwhile, noted that Yolo County currently has 302 children under the county’s care.

“That’s a lot of kids,” he said, “and we haven’t really talked about that, really, fully, until today, but I think it’s important that we continue to have this conversation. I’m glad we had this conversation.”

Future workshops on the child-welfare system are scheduled for Sept. 27, Oct. 11 and Oct. 25 while the institute’s evaluation and assessment of Yolo County’s child-welfare system will be ongoing over the next couple of months.

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