

Yolo Supervisors continue digging up dirt on Child Welfare

By Lauren King, lking@dailydemocrat.com, [@lkingwdd](https://twitter.com/lkingwdd) on Twitter

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Yolo County's Child Welfare Services system is in the midst of a major overhaul as supervisors take an in-depth look into its often veiled operations.

Frustration with the agency, which falls under Yolo County's Health and Human Services Department, reached a breaking point earlier this year after Supervisor Matt Rexroad made an impassioned speech to his colleagues pointing out its defects. Many of the issues discussed are not unique to Yolo County.

As a public servant, Rexroad was not unfamiliar with the agency's reputation. Its shortcomings became more evident when the supervisor gained personal experience with the system, losing his two-year-old foster child to what he believed to be an unsafe home. Rexroad argued that the agency seeks reunification with children's biological parents at all costs, even when it's not in the child's best interests. Among his other concerns was that the programs provided to parents prior to reunification are inadequate, causing children to return to unsafe homes.

The system has also been criticized for its lack of transparency. Rexroad's persistence, in addition to a recent high profile murder trial, motivated supervisors to take action. Samantha Green, of Woodland, was convicted of second-degree murder earlier this month after she left her 19-day-old son in the cold overnight — leading to his death.

The baby, Justice Rees, was born positive for methamphetamine in February 2015 causing Child Welfare to get involved. Justice was returned a few days later after the parents agreed to a safety plan with one of the agency's social workers. His death was an extreme example and reminder of what can go wrong with the system.

In response, a Board subcommittee was formed to "triage" the department and a series of workshops were planned to educate supervisors about the system so that, by October's final session, they are able to formulate recommendations on how to improve the agency.

The second of four workshops was held on Tuesday to give supervisors an idea of the local system's strengths and weaknesses.

According to summary data presented by Daniel Webster with the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at UC Berkeley, there are some things that Yolo County's Child Welfare system has been doing well.

For example, children placed into the county's foster care system tend to remain in the same home until a decision has been made about their permanent placement — providing them with some stability. Also, a high proportion of children are placed with

at least one of their siblings — another source of comfort for youth in the midst of a tumultuous time.

However, Webster did identify some areas in which the county fell behind the state or national average such as in the length of time children are kept waiting for decisions regarding their permanent placement. In recent years, Yolo County has had more youth under Child Welfare's care that have waited more than a year for permanent placement decisions compared to national, state, and neighboring counties'.

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Stuart Oppenheim and Danna Fabella of the Child and Family Policy Institute of California also presented information based on surveys and interviews with Child Welfare social workers and staff, biological families and former foster youth, and current foster families. Despite the recent controversy surrounding the local system, those interviewed gave Yolo's Child Welfare agency an average rating of seven, on a scale from one to 10.

Many felt that, compared to other Child Welfare systems, Yolo does well and that the system is often misunderstood.

"Lots of misunderstanding from the public and other professions about what CPS can and cannot do," said one respondent. "They care — care about the kids and families, care about doing their job right," said another.

Often, those interviewed blamed the local agency's issues on its limited staff and high staff turnover. "With the recent leadership turnover, the county has suffered a loss of stability, maturity, and openness," explained one of those interviewed. Over half of those surveyed also complained that the agency provides insufficient services for children under their care, particularly in regards to access to mental health services — forcing children to be placed on wait lists.

Chief recommendations among those interviewed were for more transparency in the department, more stability in regards to staffing, writing policies to ensure staff consistency, better training for staff, and to provide supports for visitation.

According to Oppenheim, the agency has already begun working on a number of these concerns. Among their current projects, they have created several action plans, hired analyst staff to create clear staff policies and procedures, and — in reaction to the Green case — have updated their investigation policy regarding babies born positive for drugs to increase staff oversight.

Looking ahead, supervisors will need to decide how involved they want to be in the department's development and day-to-day procedures. They have also been asked to consider how they might be able to allocate funding or facilitate relationships between Child Welfare and other agencies and nonprofits to address the issues identified.

Another series of presentations will be made to supervisors at the next workshop on Oct. 11 before the Board makes recommendations or decisions at the final workshop on Oct. 25.

According to Oppenheim, the county's recent actions are "unprecedented."

“Child Welfare doesn’t always capture the interest that we’re seeing here,” he explained at the Board’s first workshop. “We were extremely pleased to learn that the Board has a serious interest in assessing the quality of the Child Welfare Services program in Yolo County.”

Contact Lauren King at 530-406-6232.