

# Spotlight remains on county's child-welfare services system

By **Anne Ternus-Bellamy** From page A1 | September 25, 2016

What began last year with one county supervisor's legal battle with Yolo County's child-welfare system — followed by shake-ups at the agency overseeing child welfare and public scrutiny during the recent trial of a mother accused of causing her infant's death — continues Tuesday with a workshop during the Board of Supervisors meeting.

At issue: Is Yolo County doing enough to protect vulnerable children at risk for abuse and neglect?

Supervisors will get a better sense of that on Tuesday when representatives of the Child & Family Police Institute of California provide county-specific data and the results of an evaluation of Yolo County's child-welfare services during a workshop scheduled to begin at 10:30 a.m. The workshop will be the second of four scheduled through the end of October.

Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland got the ball rolling back in March when he called for changes to the way the county decides whether to permanently remove children from 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.

State and federal laws require counties to make reasonable efforts to reunify families after a child has been removed, but there are more than a dozen exceptions allowing for the reunification process to be bypassed when the risk to the child warrants it.

In order to bypass reunification, the social worker makes 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.

## Leadership change

During a board meeting in March, he called for a change in leadership at the Yolo County Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees child-welfare services and its social workers.

However, his colleagues on the board — including Supervisors Jim Provenza and Don Saylor of Davis — appeared reluctant, with Provenza saying he didn't think appointing a new health and human services director would lead to different results in child-welfare cases.

Nevertheless, agency director Joan Planell resigned a couple of weeks later.

Also departing: the agency's child, youth and family branch director, Alissa Sykes, who left in June to take a position with UC Davis Extension's Center for Human Services.

Karen Larsen, who previously served as the agency's adult and aging branch director, and also headed up mental health services in Yolo County for several years, was appointed to replace Planell as agency head.

It now will fall to Larsen and her team to implement any changes to the child-welfare system that county supervisors might choose to make.

One of the changes Rexroad sought in March was that Yolo County social workers be required to "seek bypass whenever possible."

But County Counsel Phil Pogledich told supervisors their legal authority to create such a policy is doubtful.

County supervisors, he said, 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 — but cannot control how the director does her day-to-day job.

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

### **Baby Justice case**

The decisions made by social workers in child-welfare cases, as well as their consequences, generally occur outside of the public eye, governed as they are by confidentiality rules. But the recent homicide trial of Samantha Green provided a glimpse into social workers' thinking when they decide whether it's safe for a child to remain with his or her parents.

Green was convicted of second-degree murder earlier this month in the death of her 19-day-old son, Justice. High on methamphetamine, Green had taken baby Justice down into the Ridge Cut Slough in Knights Landing during a cold winter night and remained with him there until he died of exposure.

Both baby Justice and his mother had tested positive for methamphetamine following his birth in February 2015 and both Green and her fiancé Frank Rees had a long history of meth use.

In addition to the positive drug screenings, there were indications that Green was under the influence at the hospital and was leaving the hospital without permission, social worker Valerie Zeller testified during the trial.

But drug abuse by Green and Rees alone didn't warrant Justice's removal from their custody, Zeller said. She noted that social workers consider a number of factors, including the home environment, family history, the child's fragility and parents' cognitive stability.

"There was less of a concern ... given their stable housing" and other family support, said Zeller, who helped craft the family safety plan required before Justice could be released to the custody of Green and Rees. The plan included several conditions, including that the family live with Rees's parents, clean drug tests for both of them, and their agreement to undergo random screenings.

However, no screenings were conducted prior to Justice's death.

Zeller said she did not know why they weren't, but said Green may have been given some leeway to recover from childbirth. She also cited an agency caseload she described as "overwhelming."

"We do end up prioritizing the most fragile or dangerous situations," Zeller testified.

### **Daunting task**

That the agency faces a daunting caseload, particularly when it comes to parents using methamphetamine, is clear. Every month, on average, 12 babies are born in Yolo County with methamphetamine in their systems, County Administrator Patrick Blacklock has said, but the county lacks the foster care capacity "to take every baby."

For those who are removed from their parents, Blacklock said, courts require in most cases that the county work toward family reunification.

Counties also are expected to meet target family reunification rates set by state and federal agencies.

But after seeing the results of the current evaluation, Yolo County supervisors may decide they want to prioritize the child over family reunification rates, Blacklock said. "Or they may not."

Either way, he said, "we really want to make sure, if there is one program we're doing right ... it's this one."

That's why the board voted this spring to undertake the current examination of the child-welfare system, contracting with the institute to gather data, make assessments and conduct four public workshops. The first workshop was held in July, the second will be Tuesday and the final two are scheduled for Oct. 11 and 25.

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