

Yolo County supervisors prioritize child welfare



Jesse Russell of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency answers supervisors' questions at the Board's third child welfare workshop on Tuesday morning. To his right sat Danna Fabella and Stuart Oppenheim of the Child and Family Policy Institute of California, who also addressed the Board. LAUREN KING — DAILY DEMOCRAT

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Yolo County is in the midst of revamping its child welfare system to protect its most vulnerable citizens.

Yolo Supervisors hosted their third Child Welfare Workshop on Tuesday morning to learn about best practices that the local agency is or should be implementing to provide effective services to children who are at risk for abuse or neglect.

The county began the workshops in July after frustration with the agency, which falls under Yolo County's Health and Human Services Department, reached a breaking point as a result of a recent criminal case and Supervisor Matt Rexroad's negative firsthand experience with the system.

Child welfare experts were invited to the workshops to educate supervisors on the often misunderstood system and to guide them in their efforts to improve Yolo County's.

Tuesday, experts presented information on child welfare social worker's Common Core training, Structured Decision Making and Safety Organized Practice to give the Board an opportunity to understand the local agency's mandates, requirements and statewide accepted practices.

The focus this week was on which families should be investigated; which should be left alone and connected with community resources instead; how to make these decisions consistently and effectively amongst staff; and how staff should be trained so that they are prepared to take on the challenges of their chosen field.

At the final workshop on Tuesday, Nov. 22, Health and Human Services will be presenting an action plan and a proposed budget for implementing it. The Board will also make decisions on next steps at that time.

Time and again during this past week's meeting, Supervisors asked questions related to the Samantha Green case and about how future children born positive for methamphetamine could be better protected.

Green, 24, of Woodland was convicted of second-degree murder in September for leaving her 19-day-old son in the cold overnight near a Knights Landing slough — leading to his death.

The baby, Justice Rees, was born positive for methamphetamine in February 2015 causing Child Welfare to get involved.

Justice was allowed to go home to the family a few days later after his parents agreed to a safety plan with one of the agency's social workers. Although Green agreed to participate in a substance abuse program as part of the safety plan, she failed to follow through with treatment. She was in the midst of a meth high when she brought Justice to the slough.

The baby's death was an extreme example and reminder of what can go wrong with the system. According to HHSA Director Karen Larsen, the department has already updated their investigation policies regarding babies born positive for drugs to increase staff oversight on such cases. More changes may be upcoming after the final workshop.

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Currently, about 40 percent of children born positive for drugs are returned to their parents in Yolo County.

Supervisor Don Saylor of Davis called for a "post case review" on the Green trial to help the agency see where things went wrong.

Rexroad took a personal interest in reforming the agency after he lost his two-year-old foster child to what he believed to be an unsafe home. The supervisor argued that the agency seeks reunification with children's biological parents at all costs, even when this is not in the child's best interests. He also expressed concern that the programs provided to parents prior to reunification are inadequate, causing children to return to unsafe homes.

Upon Rexroad's urging, the Board decided to perform a "triage" on the department in the form of the four workshop and subsequent policy changes.

Supervisors were first given an overview of the system and then, at the last meeting, were provide insight regarding the local system's strengths and weaknesses.

The consensus was that, though Yolo County's system isn't perfect, it is doing well compared to others.

Those interviewed in a study conducted by Stuart Oppenheim and Danna Fabella of the Child and Family Policy Institute of California, gave Yolo a rating of seven, on a scale from one to 10.

Many felt that the system is misunderstood, but did express complaints about the agency's limited staff and high turnover. Chief recommendations by those surveyed were for more transparency in the department, more stability regarding 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 ahead of their formal presentation to staff at the next workshop.

"I hope that we can get ideas on how to improve retention of quality people," said Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento. "We want to be that better place to work and retain the best people."

Villegas went on to suggest that there needs to be a balance between the Board chiming in on policies and becoming too engaged.

"I think we need to acknowledge that this is really hard work and that tragedies happen," Oppenheim reminded supervisors. "It's a struggle that they need support for."

Fabella added, "I think you have a good start here. It seems like your agency has really paid attention."

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