

# County wraps up child welfare services workshops; outlines reforms

**By Anne Ternus-Bellamy** From page A1 | December 02, 2016

Yolo County's child welfare services program has changed its policies and procedures following the death of Baby Justice Rees, a 19-day-old infant who was born with methamphetamine in his system but was allowed to remain with his parents despite their history of drug abuse and a social worker's belief the drug use was ongoing.

Such babies are now more likely to be removed from the home while their parents undergo substance abuse treatment and take other required steps to ensure the child's safety, county supervisors were told during the fourth and final child welfare services workshop held by the Board of Supervisors last month.

"We had a baby die in Yolo County, a baby we were charged with protecting," said Karen Larsen, director of the Health and Human Services Agency, which oversees child welfare services.

"And whenever tragedies like that happen, without placing blame anywhere, we have to look at our system and where we might be able to adjust our practice to have better outcomes.

"This is a practice that we have changed pretty dramatically in just the last couple of months," Larsen said.

Baby Justice died less than three weeks after birth when his mother, Samantha Green, who was high on methamphetamine at the time, took the infant down into the Ridge Cut Slough in Knights Landing during a cold winter night in 2015 and remained with him there overnight, leading to Justice's death from exposure.

During Green's homicide trial — which ended with a second-degree murder conviction in September — a Yolo County social worker described the decisions made that led to Justice remaining in the care of his mother following birth.

Both Baby Justice and Green had tested positive for methamphetamine following his birth and both Green and her former fiance 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, she said, explaining that social workers consider a number of factors, including the home environment, family history, the child's fragility and the parents' cognitive stability.

"There was less of a concern... given their stable housing" and other family support, said Zeller, who helped craft the safety plan required before Justice could be released to the custody of Green and Rees.

That safety plan included several conditions, including that the family live with Rees' parents, clean drug tests for both of them and their agreement to undergo random drug screenings.

However, no screenings were conducted and Green admitted in court to getting high prior to Justice's death. Her defense, in fact, was that a drug-induced psychosis led to Justice's death.