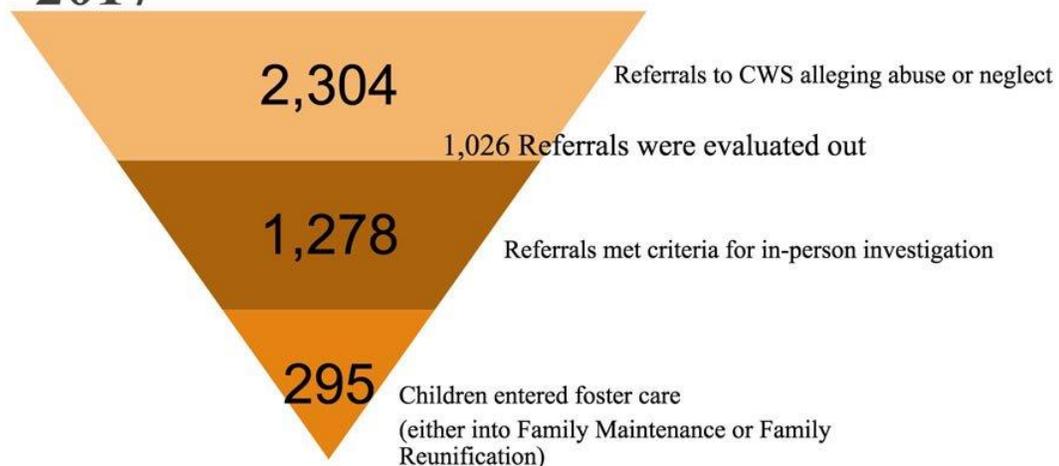


# County supervisors satisfied with child welfare system changes, even as cases increase

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy



## Referrals Resulting in Foster Care in 2017



Yolo County/Courtesy graphic

Heightened public awareness — as well as a more responsive system — may be behind an increase in referrals to the county’s child welfare services department last year.

Yolo County received 2,304 referrals in 2017 alleging abuse or neglect of children. Of those, 1,278 met the criteria for in-person investigation and 295 children ended up entering the foster care system, according to data presented to the Board of Supervisors this week.

By contrast, the total number of referrals requiring immediate investigation between January 2016 and April 2017 was 460.

The numbers marked “a huge increase in the volume of referrals we’ve received,” said Karen Larsen, head of the county’s Health and Human Services Agency.

“The number of calls coming in to our system has been growing steadily since 2013 ... and a lot over the last year,” said Larsen.

Some of that increase may be linked to publicized cases involving the abuse — and sometimes deaths — of children in Yolo County in the last couple of years, Larsen said.

But changes to the child welfare services program by the board itself during the last two years may also be at play.

### **New practices**

Prompted largely by Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland, the Board of Supervisors held a series of workshops on child welfare services in 2016 that resulted in changes to policies and procedures surrounding child welfare.

“One of the changes in practice is ... we are going out sooner upon receiving referrals,” Larsen said. “Our immediate response and 10-day response are much higher... than in 2016.”

That change may have led to a better relationship — and better lines of communication — with mandatory reporters in schools and law enforcement, Larsen said.

“We’re doing our best to increase outreach in the community, being really responsive to our school partners when they reach out and our law enforcement partners and I think they’re starting to reach out more,” Larsen said.

“We didn’t have the best reputation with our school partners and we’re trying to repair that and show that we will follow up on referrals and concerns within the school districts.”

Rexroad said he believed that has made a difference.

“I had a conversation with a school nurse who told me even though they were mandatory reporters, they weren’t calling anymore because nothing was happening when they did.

“That’s been corrected so they are now calling, which is what we should want,” Rexroad said. “So for the number of calls coming in, I’m OK if that number is going up.”

“I agree,” said Supervisor Don Saylor of Davis. “It could be very good news.”

### **More work**

The bad news, as it were, is the increased workload that goes along with more referrals, particularly since the percentage of referrals leading to investigation has stayed the same even as the number of referrals increased.

And Yolo County continues to outpace the state in children entering the foster care system, according to Larsen.

Over the last decade, the number of children entering care increased from 160 per year to 295 last year, even as the total number of children living in Yolo County only increased from 48,679 in 2007 to 49,156 last year.

The state’s trend has been the opposite.

“Ours are trending up while the state’s are trending down,” Larsen said. “Entries into the child welfare system are growing much faster than our population.”

Another area where the county has lagged behind the rest of the state is in the percentage of children exiting the system to permanency within three years.

According to a 2016 report from Children Now, Yolo County ranked 48th in the state on that metric with 79 percent of children exiting to permanency within three years. The statewide average was 84 percent.

Larsen said the department has focused quite a bit of attention and effort on improving that metric over the last 18 months.

That 2016 data, she added, was collected prior to the county’s systemwide changes, “and we are hoping to see our ranking change over time.”

Outcomes have not changed significantly in other areas highlighted by the board over the last two years: the rate of family reunification.

### **Best interest**

A major impetus for the county's focus on child welfare services was Rexroad's belief that the department was focusing too heavily on reunifying children with their families even when it might not be in the best interest of the child.

The department can seek — and a judge grant — a bypass of reunification services in certain cases and Rexroad had argued the department was not seeking bypass enough, with the end result being children remaining in foster care for years while reunification services were provided as well as children being returned to homes that remained unsafe.

Larsen reported last year that following changes requested by the board, the department was seeking bypass more often. But on Tuesday she said reunification rates have remained largely unchanged.

“Some of the board members were maybe concerned that we may have overcorrected and were reunifying less but the data actually looks like we're reunifying more than ... in 2016.

“The thing about reunification rates,” Larsen added, “is we are a piece of this but ultimately the decision lies with the court, not with the department.”

The county's juvenile dependency court has a new judge as of last summer — another change sought by the board last year — and anecdotally, Larsen said, “we feel like the cases are moving in a more timely fashion through the court system.

“There does seem to be more alignment between what the department is recommending and what the judge orders but there are still times we see things differently. We won't know for a couple of years probably what impacts we're having on the reunification rates or other rates.”

Rexroad said he wasn't worried about the number of bypasses actually going down.

“If bypasses go up one year and down the next, as long as we trust the people making the recommendations, I'm fine with it,” he said. “I'm really confident in the way this county is going. I feel really confident that they're making the best recommendations for these kids.”

His colleagues also praised the changes the county has made.

“I'm impressed,” said Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis.

“I think it's night and day in terms of how child welfare services is run and the changes that have been made have been really positive, which is to make the

safety and welfare of the child primary. Protecting children is perhaps the most important thing we do as a county.”

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