



SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY
2019-2020

Staff Retention Impacts
Child Welfare Services

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I. SUMMARY

The Child Welfare Services agency is charged with preventing, identifying and responding to referrals of child abuse and neglect, as well as allegations of exploitation. In Solano County, this agency consistently underperforms and does not meet its expected outcomes. Maintaining full staffing has been challenging due to burnout and stress. Remaining employees become overburdened with a shared workload. Cross-training, full staffing and additional management training may help alleviate some of the issues the Grand Jury observed.

II. INTRODUCTION

The 2019-2020 Solano County Civil Grand Jury reviewed the operations and staffing of Child Welfare Services (CWS) agency. The California Department of Social Services is the primary agency responsible for the State child welfare program. California is one of eleven states that governs and manages the program using a state administered/county implemented system. In Solano County, the Health and Social Services Department manages Child Welfare Services.

The purpose of the child welfare program in the County is to prevent, identify and respond to referrals of child abuse and neglect, as well as allegations of exploitation. Child Welfare Services uses Structured Decision Making tools (consistently-applied set of protocols), as presented by the State to investigate and place children appropriately.

The goals of the CWS program are to:

- protect children from abuse and neglect
- provide services for families to safely remain together
- temporarily place children
- find permanent homes if family reunification is not appropriate.

Solano County CWS social workers, supervisors and managers receive referrals, investigate allegations, report outcomes, assist with family reunification, provide maintenance services for families with substantiated allegations, and provide permanency planning and adoption services. The California Department of Social Services regulations state that one responsibility of a Child Welfare Social Worker is to establish and maintain a relationship with children and families within CWS to provide the foundation for children to grow into healthy, productive adults. The outcomes of substantiated cases are intended to be reviewed and reported for accountability, quality and improvement. These reports address:

- the safety of children remaining in their homes
- the connection with family if a child is temporarily placed
- maintenance services for families.

Solano County staff indicated to the Grand Jury that outcomes, accountability and the inability to meet performance guidelines are negatively affected by high employee turnover, the lack of experience and training of management and staff, the low level of trust within the division, unequal workload, vacant positions and limited random case reviews.

Solano County Child Welfare Services is the department responsible for protecting children from abuse and neglect. The federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), originally passed in 1974, provides funding to states in support of prevention, assessment, investigation, prosecution, and treatment activities. It was most recently amended and reauthorized by the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-320). The State of California is responsible for distributing the funds and requiring counties' compliance with state and federal guidelines and laws.

New to California Child Welfare Services is Assembly Bill (AB) 403 the Continuum of Care Reform of 2017. This bill reformed foster care services by strengthening permanency support and decreasing congregate care to short-term placements. The policy framework of AB 403 was designed with the understanding that a child who must remain apart from their parents be cared for in a committed family home, rather than group homes or multiple foster care homes. The responsibilities of foster care homes, now referred to as resource family homes, have been revised and reformed.

The Child Welfare Services division is under the authority of the Deputy Director of Solano County Health and Social Services/Children and Adult Resources. There are 126 potential social worker positions allocated to three managers and 16 supervisors. (see Appendix).

Child Welfare Services positions are divided into four functions:

- Hotline Screeners—Receive reports of neglect or abuse and determine action.
- Emergency Response (ER) workers—Investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect.
- Family Reunification/Family Maintenance (FR/FM)—Provides services to families that need assistance in the protection and care of their children and arranges for children to live with relatives or with resource families when they are not safe at home.
- Permanency Placement (PP)—Arranges for reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children leaving resource family care.

All requests for child protective services on new or existing cases are directed to the Child Protection Hotline for initial assessment. Solano County CWS employs four Hotline Social Workers. The phone lines are frequently busy, and callers are directed to leave a message with a contracted operator. In-person referrals are discouraged due to insufficient staffing.

Referrals involve allegations of suspected child abuse, neglect and/or exploitation. Staff indicated most referrals are for general neglect of children, substance abuse and domestic violence. A growing concern in Solano County is human trafficking, and calls are received about children being “groomed” for trafficking and exploitation.

The Hotline staff screens and identifies the types of calls which constitute appropriate referrals of child abuse pursuant to federal law and the Structured Decision Making tools. The purpose of Hotline-specific tools is to assess whether a referral meets the threshold for an in-person investigative response. In Solano County, the Emergency Response (ER) social workers respond for the in-person investigations at any time of the day or night. At times, the ER social worker may be accompanied by law enforcement. The ER workers have prescribed time frames for responding to referrals ranging from two hours up to 24 hours for more immediate referrals and up to 10 days for non-immediate referrals. If the referral does not require an in-person response, the Hotline tools help screeners determine whether a community response is more appropriate.

In December 2019:

- Solano County CWS Hotline screened 345 referrals
- 60 were investigated by the Emergency Response social workers
- 177 referrals were evaluated out as not meeting the threshold for further CWS investigation.

In January 2020:

- CWS received 200 referrals
- CWS received 31 referrals for priority immediate response. This represents 15.5% of the 200 total calls
- 60 cases were evaluated within the required 10 days
- 86 referrals were evaluated out as not meeting the threshold for further CWS investigation
- 22 referrals were reported as not completed.

An Emergency Response supervisor reviews all referrals and actions taken. Each referral is documented in the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) and cross-checked for any previous referrals or reports. Risk levels for a child's situation are used for determining safe and appropriate actions for the family.

The Family Reunification/Family Maintenance supervisors and social workers are responsible for maintaining contact, completing reports and making required home visits. They also coordinate services pertaining to mental and physical health, education, family meetings for children and families based upon needs. Community agencies and non-profit groups in the County aid in the process of reunifying families and with the maintenance of the families. The Permanency Placement supervisors and social workers arrange for adoptions and permanent homes for children leaving the program.

The following chart indicates CWS outcomes in Solano County from 2009 through 2019.



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CCWIP Dashboard

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County: Agency Type:



Note: the scales of the charts on this page are not standardized and vary based on the data.

III. METHODOLOGY

Reviewed:

- Federal CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-320)
- State of California
 - Welfare and Institutions Code /Legislative Information Code Sections
 - Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act
 - Assembly Bill 403, Continuum of Care Reform of 2017
 - Child Abuse or Severe Neglect Indexing Form
 - Child Welfare Indicators Project/Dashboard
 - Structured Decision Making assessment tools
 - Child and Family Services Review
 - www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets
- Solano County
 - Child Welfare Services Policy and Procedures Manual
 - Child Welfare Overview

- Health and Social Services Child Welfare Organizational Chart and Staffing
- Staff Development and Training Manual and Social Worker Core Training Schedule
- Child Welfare Employee Separations Graphs November 2017-2019
- Health and Social Services Annual Report FY 17/18 “Solano County’s Bringing Families Home (BFH) Program is Changing Lives” July 2016-June 2019
- Casey Family Programs Retention article
- Child Abuse Hotline and Screening Document
- Solano County Website

Interviewed:

- Health and Social Services Management
- Child Welfare Services Division Management and Supervisors
- Child Welfare Services Division Staff

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

At the time of this report, the division social worker and support staffing levels for Emergency Response (ER), including Hotline, Family Maintenance/Family Reunification (FM/FR) and Permanent Placement (PP) were as follows:

Division	Allocated Staff	Current Staffing	Vacant Positions
ER	41	39	2
FM/FR	38	35	3
PP	39	29	10

According to CWS staff, between 2017 and 2019, 27 Social Worker III staff “separated” from employment. The turnover rate from November 2017 to November 2018 was 20.8%, and from November 2018 to November 2019 increased to 25.8%. Of those staff leaving the agency, six were employed less than six months, three were employed between six and twelve months, seven were employed between one and two years, seven were employed between two and five years and four were employed five or more years.

Reasons for the unusually high level of staff turnover, as reported by CWS staff, include stressful work environment, emotional burnout, lack of experience and training of management and staff, the low level of trust within the division, unequal workload, vacant positions and limited feedback and support from supervisors. The turnover of caseworkers leaving the agency incurs extensive operational costs per separated employee.

Direct costs include:

- Overtime
- Worker separation
- Hiring/training of replacement staff.

Indirect costs include (but are not limited to):

- Increased paperwork and case management for other workers
- Emotional exhaustion of supervisors having to redirect time to provide client services
- Processing changes in placement
- Increased time in family resource care (whether in a group or family home) leading to reduced permanency and chances of reunification
- Recurrence of abuse and neglect, including the cost of investigation and placement
- Failure to meet Federal and State performance standards, potentially leading to loss of funding.

Staff stated that at times the number of Emergency Hotline calls exceeds the availability of the social workers to answer the calls. Callers must then leave a voice message with the contracted operator, which lengthens response time, potentially increasing immediate danger to affected children. This also results in a cumulative workload increase for staff.

The Casey Family Programs Retention article provided by CWS staff indicated high workloads create a “domino effect.” Staff burnout and stress lead to attrition that can result in failure to meet professional standards for investigation as well as decreased worker-family contact, case response, completion and reviews. Other negative impacts include increased time to placement and permanency, the number of resource family re-entries and rates of maltreatment recurrence.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDING 1 – Child Welfare Services has a workforce turnover rate negatively affecting the performance of the agency and outcomes for the children of Solano County.

RECOMMENDATION 1a – Fill allocated Social Worker positions and employ additional support staff for Child Welfare Services.

RECOMMENDATION 1b – Provide cross-training to staff members to maintain all services at all times.

FINDING 2 – Retention of Child Welfare staff is difficult due to the complex, demanding, and emotionally challenging responsibilities, exacerbated by limited support from supervisors.

RECOMMENDATION 2 – Provide time and replacement staff for managers and supervisors to receive area-specific management training to improve staff emotional and procedural support.

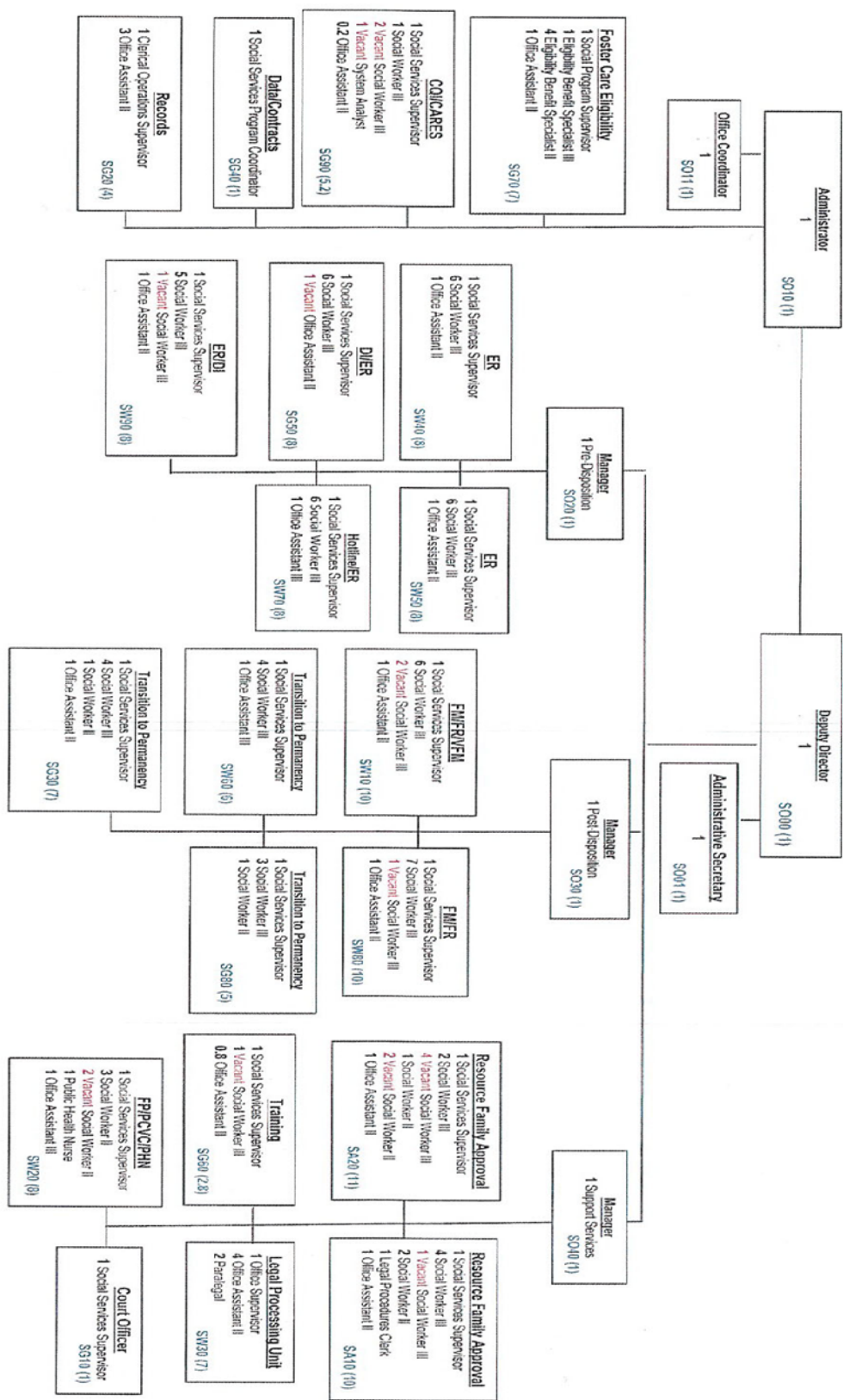
REQUIRED RESPONSES

Solano County Board of Supervisors, Clerk
Solano County Department of Health & Social Services (H&SS), Director
Solano County Department of H&SS/Child Welfare Services, Deputy Director

COURTESY COPIES

California Child Welfare Agency, Director
Sacramento Child, Family and Adult Services, Director

Solano County Health and Social Services
 Child Welfare Services
 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) 142.0



Updated by: iao

CWS PUBLIC Org Chart Through 09.19.19.docx