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COURT SYSTEM



JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA ❖ ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE COURTS

isn't just federal timelines that dictate how quickly a court needs to determine the child's long-term placement—it is also the need to protect the child's psychological well-being.

AVOIDING OR REDUCING THE USE OF FOSTER CARE

Because pre-permanency foster care may be developmentally damaging to children, it is essential to explore all other alternatives before resorting to the use of foster care. Alternatives include

- thorough searches for relatives and family group conferences to identify appropriate placements within the extended family, and provision of stipends for the child's care during the placement;³⁰
- family preservation programs to strengthen placements within extended families; and
- drug treatment programs that focus on the needs of the entire family and include placement of mothers and children together in secure settings.

All these approaches serve to avoid the negative effects of nonrelative foster placements for children by developing placements within extended families. When programs incorporating these approaches exist in the community, they may provide a viable alternative to nonrelative care.

Substance abuse treatment models that focus on treatment of the entire family do exist, but in small numbers. One of the most promising alternatives to foster care for these families is **SHIELDS for Families** in Los Angeles. SHIELDS has achieved great success in providing comprehensive services to families dealing with substance abuse. The program targets not only the substance-abusing parent but also other family members affected by the abuse, including drug-exposed infants and other siblings. The success of this program is extremely encouraging.³¹

A critical component of other promising programs is that children of the substance-abusing parent live in the treatment facility with their recovering parent; obviously such placement must be consistent with

a professional risk assessment for child safety. These models are highly beneficial because they allow the family to remain intact during drug treatment, thus promoting healthy parent-child attachment and avoiding the use of foster care. Parents attend parenting and child development classes to learn the skills they need to raise a healthy child. Additionally, the entire family receives structure and services to mitigate the damage of parental substance abuse.

THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY EXPERIENCE—A CASE STUDY

Although foster care is not a preferred placement option, sometimes it is unavoidable. When it is the only viable alternative, the juvenile courts should take steps to minimize the developmental damage caused by out-of-home placement. The experience of the San Diego County dependency court's Recovery Project may offer guidance.

Applying the proposed reforms, San Diego County has virtually eliminated long delays to permanent placement. The increased use of family group conferences,³² thorough family investigations, and intensive, court-monitored drug and alcohol treatment has lessened children's exposure to the psychological trauma of nonrelative care and lengthy placement in long-term foster care.

Prior to April 1998, approximately 80 percent of dependency cases in San Diego County involved alcohol or drug abuse by one or both parents.³³ Immediate and effective treatment was not available for parents, so the court extended deadlines for compliance with reunification plans. As a consequence, rather than providing prompt and definitive intervention, the previous system allowed families to drift for unacceptably long periods, discouraging parental rehabilitation and aggravating parent-child separations. San Diego County also was far from compliant with statutory time frames; statistics indicate it took more than 34 months to close 50 percent of the dependency cases.³⁴ That meant children and adolescents spent years in foster care. More than 50 percent of the children in foster care