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IN CHILD WELFARE TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Regional Panel Presentation
Los Angeles County Regional Update
Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services

Summary
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Mark Miller, M.A., M.P.A., Training Director, Training Division, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services

Los Angeles County comprises 28% of California's population and features one of the most diverse populations in the world. Half of the county's 10 million residents speak a language other than English in their homes. Services provided by the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services are administered by 18 child welfare offices, each with a regional office team. Mr. Miller has worked for Los Angeles County for 25 years, and conceded that it is challenging to undertake systemic changes in an institution that serves a population as vast as that of Los Angeles County.

Mr. Miller posed the following question:

Given the size and scope of Los Angeles County, how can leadership initiate changes in practice that improve the level of cultural competency, and reduce disproportionality and disparities?

Despite the urgency that accompanies these issues, Mr. Miller cautioned against moving too quickly without a thorough consideration of the comprehensive work that must accompany a true change of culture within an organization. He discussed the concept of a "learning organization" that not only promotes the learning of new ideas, but also identifies outdated information to be "unlearned."

Mr. Miller noted the critical importance of sharing and partnering with all levels of the child welfare agency to shepherd and implement many of the innovations needed to improve cultural competency and confront disproportionality and disparities. An organization must also learn to work differently with the community. In order for the learning process to be successful, much time and patience is needed to implement strategic changes and initiatives that will support the organization and its partners to make incremental improvements over time.

Mr. Miller presented a brief history of the county's efforts to implement organizational change. A series of seven different county directors between the years 1993 and 2003 resulted in inconsistent leadership. Efforts to work with communities were sporadic and not sustained. Tools and resources used at this time were out of date and not conducive to the work that needed to be done. Overall, the organization was more incident-driven than mission-driven. The agency attempted to use data in a productive manner; however appropriate outcome tools were not developed. Mr. Miller reported that Los Angeles County had 29,345 children in care in 2003 and a total caseload of just over 40,000 children.

Mr. Miller cited caseload reduction and workforce development as essential components for changing practice within Los Angeles County. He explained that workers must have more time with the children and families on their caseload in order to nurture meaningful change. As a first step in confronting this challenge, Los Angeles County increased their workforce of social workers from 2,700 in 2003 to 2,981 in 2005, and supervisor positions increased from 446 to 597. Through Title IV-E funds, Los Angeles was also able to decrease caseloads while maintaining staff positions. These efforts permitted the emergence of a system that allowed local offices more flexibility and time to access resources for children and families. Achievements of positive outcomes were recognized.

Los Angeles County also addressed attrition and workforce stability. Between 2003-2005, the county's attrition rate dropped from 8.4% to 6.4%. The county successfully attracted new, energized people who often provided a fresh perspective.

Mr. Miller highlighted the following steps to initiate organizational change:

1. **Assess and evaluate** the current state of the organization to support culturally competent practice while using resources more efficiently.
2. **Target outcomes and establish benchmarks** while being clear with staff about what the organization is expected to achieve.
3. **Develop and identify core strategies and best practices** that will help staff to achieve targeted outcomes.
4. **Target caseload and workload issues** that will reprioritize efforts and reinvigorate the supervisory rank and file of the organization.
5. **Implement supports** through training, tools, protocols and administrative assistance.
6. **Monitor and provide constructive feedback** regarding both positive and negative outcomes.

Mr. Miller next discussed core strategies that the county utilized in coordination with community partnerships in order to address safety, permanence and well-being:

1. **Safety**
 - a. Implemented "points of engagement," an overall service delivery approach that incorporates structured decision making and team decision

making expansion, including the implementation of multi-disciplinary assessment teams.

- b. The county also implemented multi-disciplinary assessment teams for differential/alternative response.

2. Permanence

- a. Implemented the “concurrent planning redesign,” a reorganization of efforts to locate, secure, and facilitate the development of alternative plans earlier in the placement process.
- b. Piloted permanency units that focused on specialized populations. For example, one office dedicated such units to youth that have been in care for a long period of time.
- c. Infused the family finding process throughout the system for all children.

3. Well-Being

- a. Utilized team decision making and, specifically, the Linkages project through the Department of Public Social Services in order to identify family needs before placement.
- b. Co-located mental health staff in half of the county’s offices in order to link children and families with mental health services.

Mr. Miller introduced the two other panelists, Tedji Dessalegn and Maryam Fatemi, who are Regional Administrators for Los Angeles County. He asked them to reflect on initiatives that the county has employed. Ms. Dessalegn and Ms. Fatemi discussed how their offices handled implementation, accountability, and challenges throughout the last few years.

Tedji Dessalegn, Regional Administrator (Metro North, Los Angeles County)

Maryam Fatemi, Regional Administrator (Pomona, Los Angeles County)

Both Ms. Dessalegn and Ms. Fatemi explained that their teams first identified the zip codes in their respective regions with the highest rates of involvement with the child welfare system. Within these areas, both offices began identifying resources, building community partnerships and creating networking opportunities for community agencies.

Ms. Fatemi noted that her office began sharing Bureau of Information Services data regarding community demographics of children and families involved in the child welfare system. Community partners were pleased by the increased transparency of the agency, but were disappointed by the disproportionality and disparities reflected in some of their populations.

In both regions, community-wide discussions began about disparities experienced by African American children within the child welfare system. Such involvement aided the development of responsive community strategies for improvement.

One of the challenges noted by Ms. Fatemi was the management of systems change and the development of accountability among staff. As managers, Ms. Dessalegn and Ms. Fatemi agreed that it is critical to demonstrate how changes can be integrated into daily work. Facilitating such changes for staff in a manner that will be sustainable is critical to

the success of such initiatives. Throughout the county, regional offices have worked together to collaborate, share and implement successful practices in a cooperative and systemic way.

Mr. Miller commented on the importance of harnessing the creative competence and commitment of the community. This includes incorporating community-driven ideas and strategies into child welfare work and building ownership with communities across time. Mr. Miller encouraged the audience, as they begin to share practice changes at a skill level, to frame initiatives as a way of working smarter and differently, while keeping in mind the on-the-ground realities faced by communities, families, children and child welfare staff.