



**FIFTH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM ON FAIRNESS & EQUITY
ISSUES IN CHILD WELFARE TRAINING AND EDUCATION**

Presentation/Discussion
The California Disproportionality Project
Stuart Oppenheim & Lisa Molinar

Summary of Presentation
April 13, 2007

Stuart Oppenheim

Stuart Oppenheim introduced the California Disproportionality Project that is scheduled for implementation in 2008 in selected county child welfare agencies throughout California. The project is being developed in conjunction with the Child and Family Policy Institute of California, CalSWEC, Casey Family Programs and The Annie E. Casey Foundation. The project's objective is to address disproportionate representation of ethnic minorities in California's public child welfare system and initiate steps towards creating positive change.

Workers in the field witnessed disparities in the child welfare system as early as the 1980s, yet no one knew how to fix the problem. Disproportionate representation was not publicly acknowledged as a relevant issue until after the year 2000, and it was at this time that the first steps toward change took place.

In 2003, CalSWEC and the Northern Training Academy sponsored the first Symposium on Fairness and Equity Issues in Child Welfare Training that is now an annual tradition. In the following years, CalSWEC and CWDA together with the Child and Family Policy Institute sponsored two leadership symposia centered on initiating change at the leadership and management levels of child welfare organizations. The understanding was, and still is, that for true change to occur it must happen at several levels: via systems, managers, and workers providing direct services.

The collaborative groups soon realized that something more needed to be done to create "sustained, deep structural change" to address the issue of disproportionality. It was simply not enough to hold trainings and discussions about the issue; the idea to create change using the Breakthrough Series Collaborative methodology was born.

Mr. Oppenheim briefly described the Breakthrough Series' methodology as a model whereby one takes small, strategic steps towards a desired end goal, rather than trying to change everything at once. Small steps that can be taken easily and immediately are

identified, then tested and measured for their effectiveness. If the steps are seen as successful, then they are replicated and taken to broader applications.

The design phase of the project is currently underway. By borrowing concepts from the Breakthrough Series, it is hopeful that the public child welfare system will soon see reform occur step by step.

Lisa Molinar

Lisa Molinar outlined the major goals of the California Disproportionality Project:

- To reduce and ultimately eliminate disparities in child welfare
- To develop and support an active learning environment, in which we continuously learn from one another

The project will involve the voluntary participation of 14 counties throughout the state, which will be selected through a solicitation of interested participants. Each of the participating counties will develop a county-level team consisting of formal system partners, community partners, families and youth. A state interagency team will also participate in the project.

As mentioned earlier, the project will utilize the methodology of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative, but will not be limited to this model. The focus is to change practice, policy and eventually outcomes. Creating a framework that will allow for these changes is most important.

Sharing common values and establishing common language are also central to the project's success. Common definitions for terms such as disproportionate representation need to be established in order for effective communication to take place. Communication must also occur internally within an agency and externally with collaborative partners.

Consistent and regular data will also be kept, so that methods and practices are continually improved and desired outcomes achieved. It will also be important to engage families most affected by the system as equal partners in the process. Agency practices, policies and fiscal allocations may be examined as well, including how workers engage with families and make conjoint decisions at critical decision points. Training academies and curriculum developers will also have a role in the project as curricula will need to be transformed to match emerging effective practices.

Audience discussion:

County-level teams will be selected from applications expressing their interest in the project. Many cross sections of the community will also be invited to participate in the development and implementation of the project. Foster parents are encouraged to offer their expertise and faculty members will be asked to provide technical assistance as

subject matter experts. It is important that community members make their concerns known when public agencies do not acknowledge the existence of disproportionate representation.

Community members and families must be invited to participate in the project because they are the ones most affected by disparities in the system. However, after inviting these members, it is important to have conversations that acknowledge the deleterious effects of racism and oppression, and that explore how racism can be undone.

It is estimated that counties will be selected circa February 2008 and the project will start in December 2008 or January 2009.