SEGMENT 2

Evidence Informed Social Work Practice; Evidence Based Practice: The Importance of Asking Questions and Interpreting Data to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes

TOTAL SEGMENT TIME: 30 min
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Evidence Informed Social Work Practice; Evidence Based Practice: The Importance of Asking Questions and Interpreting Data to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes

TOTAL SEGMENT TIME: 30 min

PowerPoint Slides: 5 - 8

Materials:
- Handouts:
  - #9 - Evidence Based Social Work Practice
  - #10 - Data Analysis
  - #11 - San Francisco Chronicle Newspaper – No Refuge for Foster Youth, It’s a State of Chance
  - #12 - San Francisco Chronicle Newspaper – Accidents of Geography
  - #13 - Broken Promises Executive Summary
  - #14 - Fresno County PowerPoint Slide – Apples and Oranges

Pre-training Preparation:
- Review definitions of EBP and EIP
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic/Time</th>
<th>Learning Objective</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
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<tr>
<td>DAY 1, SEGMENT 2 10:05 – 10:35 am (30 minutes)</td>
<td><strong>K2:</strong> Trainee will understand the difference between evidence based practice and evidence informed practice</td>
<td>Lecture and discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence Informed Social Work Practice</td>
<td><strong>K3:</strong> Trainee will understand the connection between evidence informed social work practice and data analysis</td>
<td>1. Define Evidence Based/Evidence-Informed Practice and their link to data analysis</td>
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<td>Evidence Based Practice: The Importance of asking questions and interpreting data to improve child welfare outcomes</td>
<td><strong>K4:</strong> Trainee will understand the pitfalls of misinterpreting data</td>
<td>2. Discuss data use and interpretation</td>
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<td>3. Discuss Data Analysis</td>
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<td>Fresno County article review</td>
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**Training Tips and Discussion Points:**

**Evidence Based Social Work Practice**
- Refer Trainees to the Evidence Based Social Work Practice handout (*Handout #9*).

- Define Evidence Based Practice
  Evidence Based Social Work Practice is an approach to practice that includes the process of combining:
  - research knowledge,
  - professional/clinical expertise, and
  - client and community values, preferences and circumstances.

It is a dynamic and fluid process whereby practitioners continually:
- seek,
- interpret,
- use, and
- evaluate the best available information

in an effort to make the best practice decisions in social work. Valuable evidence may be derived from many sources – ranging from systematic reviews and meta-analyses (highest level of evidence) to less rigorous research designs (lower level of evidence).

Generally speaking, a lot of people think about Evidence Based practice as evidence based treatment, programs or interventions. Practitioners may state that they are practicing “Evidence Based Practice” because they refer clients to programs that have a proven track record. This belief is getting more popular as practitioners learn about different resources, for example, the California Evidence Based Clearinghouse.
http://www.cachildwelfareclearinghouse.org/. This website provides information about interventions/programs that have been researched and proven to be effective by practice and research experts. Some examples include:

- multidimensional treatment foster care (MDTC)
- Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)
- Multisystemic Therapy (MST)
- Motivational Interviewing
- The Incredible years
- Triple P- Positive Parenting Program, etc.

- Define Evidence Informed Practice
  - Discuss the confusion about the interpretation of each definition

Evidence Based Practice, in the social work profession, needs more empirically supported research in order for people to be able to use the term universally. This means that we need more researchers to study child welfare, replicate previous research studies and publish positive results. It can take some time to definitively make a statement that something is “evidence based”. According to the CEBC, it takes approximately 17 years to say a program/intervention is “evidence-based”.

Therefore, Evidence Informed Practice may be more applicable to public child welfare. This process, like EBP, involves questioning and assessing the way that child welfare is currently done, and seeking additional research, information, resources, and interventions to guide practice that is ethically appropriate. It is a process for doing work in a strategically sound way. Evidence informed practice seeks to produce the same level of stringency as evidence based practice, however, because research is not readily available, other valuable resources (including authority based) may be used as part of the evidence based movement; concrete steps leading in the direction on the road to evidence-based practice.

Translation for this T4T: Evidence Informed Practice is the day-to-day activities that practitioners and administrators employ to make the best decisions for children and families. It can include referring families to programs or interventions with proven track records like Triple P Positive Parenting Program, Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), and Motivational Interviewing on the California Evidence Based Clearinghouse website. According to the definition, it can also include a self reflective practice model that involves questioning what you do and how you do it.

- Describe the Day-to-Day Evidence Informed Practice Activities from the following perspectives (refer trainees to the Evidence Based Practice handout):
  - Line Staff
  - Supervisor
  - Management
Encourage Trainers to provide items to add to the list. Trainers can also ask county staff for a list of contributions.

**Misinterpreting Data**

- **Data, Information Knowledge**

Sometimes the words 'data' and 'information' are used interchangeably. However, data, information, and knowledge mean specific things. Data, information and knowledge are steps in a classification process that moves from data, to information, and then to knowledge. For the purposes of this training, data are basic facts. For example, the numbers 58, 65, and 75 are data in the purest form. They are unstructured raw facts resulting from empirical observation. In the corporate world, as well as in child welfare, huge quantities of data are generally available. If we think about the CWS/CMS case for a child, there are numerous fields that contain data, basic facts stored in the database.

All data are not equally important, however. A key to success for agencies is access to the right information at the right time at the right place in the right form. It is only when data are placed in context, transformed into information that it becomes valuable. Information represents data in the context of decision making. In the example above, data became information when you know that these numbers represent the mean temperatures for July 15 for the past 3 years. If you are planning a family picnic, this data has become valuable information that will assist you in picking a date for the event - the right information at the right time in the right form.

Information is the next level in the data to knowledge progression. Information is data that has been selected by someone because it has some relevance to their needs.

Knowledge is information combined with experience, context, interpretation and reflection. Knowledge is a higher value form of information that is ready to apply to decisions and actions. The human element is important at this point as a filter to determine which knowledge is applicable in which context. Knowledge is the result of collecting and distilling information over time to understand what works and what doesn't work. The key factor in assessing knowledge is time - that is, collecting and applying information to decisions over time yields knowledge. For instance, in trying to decide on a date for the family picnic, you know from years of experience, or by looking at long term trends, that the 2nd week of August has the best temperature for holding the event.

Let’s look at the way this concept can be applied in child welfare:

Data are facts about the case that are entered into the database and stored there. For example, we can record a list of ‘data’ in a case....maybe just a list of dates. By
themselves these pieces of data have no meaning. However if a person looks at the date in combination with the data connected with the entry, the numbers make more sense. They mean something when we know that 6/17/09 is the date that the child entered foster care, for example. Even so, taken individually, these facts may not tell you much about the case.

However, when a person begins to relate the pieces of data and consider all the information available, then he or she can begin to make some observations, or begin to acquire knowledge about this case and actions that should be taken regarding it.

For example, considering the date the child entered foster care, is it time to file a petition to terminate parental rights? (Has the child been is foster care for 15 out of the most recent 22 months?) Or, look at the number of case worker visits, is that enough considering the time the child has been in custody. Is there any data missing that is needed to draw conclusions? Where is that data located? Is it in CWS/CMS, or is there some other place to look for it. And finally, what kinds of decisions, if any, should the caseworker and the supervisor make at this point? How should they decide to manage this information? The decisions made here will reflect the knowledge that has been accumulated over the history of the case.

Individual pieces of data in a database mean nothing. People must decide what pieces of data are important to them, know how to retrieve them from the database and then analyze them to determine in what ways they can be useful to them. The computer can't do this procedure alone. It still requires human intervention to use data effectively and to transform it into information and then into knowledge.

Now we want to go a step further and talk about integration of information management into an organization. Information management views data, information and knowledge as organizational resources designed to help an agency achieve its goals.

Information technology generally causes the creation of lots of data. Taking that data and creating information and knowledge and then incorporating that information and knowledge into the fabric of the organization, to support the mission of the agency, is a critical organizational challenge. It's through the use of the information and knowledge to inform activities such as policy making, goal setting and measuring progress toward achieving agency outcomes and goals, case decision making, personnel activities, creating budget requests and other day-to-day activities that distinguishes information management from information technology.

Successful integration of information management into an organization takes data, information, knowledge combined with people, technology and management to improve practice and ultimately move toward achieving an organization's goals—in this case achieving the goals of safety, permanency and well-being.
Refer Trainees to the following handouts

- The San Francisco Chronicle Newspaper – No Refuge for Foster Youth, It’s a State of Chance (Handout #11)
- The San Francisco Chronicle Newspaper – Accidents of Geography (Handout #12)

The two articles that appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle newspaper are good examples of misinterpreting data. The data were taken from another report, “Broken Promises: California’s Inadequate and Unequal Treatment of its Abuse and Neglected Children” (Handout #13). The report was a well intentioned report, written by the National Center for Youth Law. However, when pieces of information were taken from the report, SF Chronicle writers violated several rules of data interpretation:

**The San Francisco Chronicle Newspaper – No Refuge for Foster Youth, It’s a State of Chance**

- Look at the first 4 bullets in terms of the comparisons the article makes and then note the following:
  - They compared one county to another county. The Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) and the writers of the Broken Promises report cautioned against this
    - Counties should not be compared to other counties because they are vastly different in:
      - Demographics (in terms of the people they serve)
      - Geographic location
      - Economics
      - Practices
      - Policies
      - Available resources
      - Budgetary constraints
      - Worker skills and experiences
      - Clientele experiences
      - Community connections
      - Data entry procedures
  - They cited statistics without citing the source of the information
  - They made conclusions based on faulty, missing, inadequate data
  - Their comments are insightful

The data regularly posted on the Berkeley website is public. It is imperative that we be able to explain it. On one hand, it is valuable because it allows for:

- Greater performance accountability
- Promotes community awareness and involvement
- Give the ability to track improvement over time and areas of concern
Encourages dialogue

On the other hand, it can be dangerous as there is:
- Potential for misuse and misinterpretation
- Available to those looking to create sensational headlines
- Misunderstood data can lead to the wrong policy decisions

Ranking is a popular approach to presenting data, as this article does on the second page. Important notes:
- It’s all relative, someone will always be ranked last (and first)
- Ranking masks improvement over time

**The San Francisco Chronicle Newspaper – Accidents of Geography**
Looking at the second article, the author suggests that the ‘levels of safety, permanence and stability are purely an accident of geography’ and the 3 bullets listed are comparisons of several counties. The Apples to Oranges comparison approach to presenting data is again a popular approach.

**Case Example: Fresno County**
- Refer Trainees to the Fresno County Outcomes handout (Handout #14)

Let’s drill down deeper into one of the examples:

“*Foster children in Fresno County are three times more likely to remain in foster care for more than a year than in Sacramento County*”.

Is it fair to compare Fresno County to Sacramento County?
- Sacramento County spans more geographic land than Fresno
- There are more children in care in Sacramento than Fresno
- How might Fresno and Sacramento county practices differ?
- How might Fresno and Sacramento county policies differ?

Looking at the data, we can see that Fresno County has a much higher population of children in poverty than Sacramento, and a higher population of non-white children. Demographically, this is a significant difference, noting that different families and children are being served. We can also see that first entry rates into Foster Care are much lower than in Sacramento reflecting a practice difference. Finally, looking at re-entry rates back into Foster Care, we can see that Sacramento’s re-entry rate is substantially higher than Fresno County’s re-entry rate.

In retrospect, as we look articles such as these, it reminds us to be wary of looking only at the surface of the data, but we need to understand the relationship between
the data and the practice within the county that impacts the data. It is clear that the ‘experts’ know the data, are the child welfare professionals within the county and we must take on that role to educate the public as articles like these surface.

End of Activity

PowerPoint Slides, 5 – 8

5

EBP VS. EIP

Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence-Informed Practice

6

EIP Translation

- Worker perspective

- Supervisory perspective

- Management perspective

7

Data Mis-Interpretation

How much is 3 and 3?

It depends on who you ask

8

Apples & Oranges

- “Foster children in Fresno Co are 3 times more likely to remain in FC for more than a year than Sacramento.”

- Different families and children served:

- Different related outcomes,
  - 1st entry rates are lower
  - Re-entry rates are consistently lower
Evidence Based Social Work Practice

**Evidence Based Social Work Practice**
An approach to social work practice that includes the process of combining research knowledge, professional/clinical expertise, and client and community values, preferences and circumstances. It is a dynamic and fluid process whereby practitioners continually seek, interpret, use, and evaluate the best available information in an effort to make the best practice decisions in social work. Valuable evidence may be derived from many sources – ranging from systematic reviews and meta-analyses (highest level of evidence) to less rigorous research designs (lower level of evidence).

Generally speaking, a lot of people think about Evidence Based interventions as evidence based practice. Practitioners may state that they are practicing “Evidence Based Practice” because they refer clients to programs that have a proven track record. This belief is getting more popular as practitioners learn about different resources, for example, the California Evidence Based Clearinghouse [http://www.cachildwelfareclearinghouse.org/](http://www.cachildwelfareclearinghouse.org/). This website provides interventions/programs that have been researched and proven effective by practice and research experts.

**Evidence Informed Practice**
Evidence Based Practice in the social work profession needs more empirically supported research in order for people to be able to use the term universally. Therefore, *Evidence Informed Practice* may be more applicable to public child welfare. This process, like EBP, involves questioning and assessing the way that child welfare is currently done, and seeking additional research, information, resources, and interventions to guide practice that is ethically appropriate. Evidence informed practice seeks to produce the same level of stringency as evidence based practice, however, because research is not readily available, other valuable resources (including authority based) may be used as part of the evidence based movement; concrete steps leading in the direction on the road to evidence-based practice.

Evidence Informed Practice is the day-to-day activities that practitioners and administrators employ to make the best decisions for children and families. It can include referring families to programs with proven track records. It can also include a self reflective practice model that involves questioning what you do and how you do it.

Evidence Based Practice involves 5 steps:

1. **Ask Questions:**
   - Ask a question that is relevant to your practice
   - Be specific and concrete
   - Clarity in constructing the question saves time in the search

2. **Acquire Information:**
   - The research/evidence that you gather will come from many sources

3. **Appraise the literature and interventions**
   - Discern who the experts are
   - Think about their experience, education, affiliations, etc.
   - Do the EBP program/interventions appear equitable
   - Can the EBP interventions be used on the population you work with?
IV. Apply what you have learned to your practice

- Implement changes in your practice

V. Assess your practice and interventions

- Do I make better decisions?
- Are clients receiving EBP interventions?
- Are the interventions doing what they said they would do?
- Can I see change/difference in the clients that I work with?
- How do I inform my colleagues and others about the program’s success?

From Data…to Outcomes - TRANSLATION:

Workers perspective

- Social Work staff ask themselves:
  - What am I doing?
  - Why am I doing it?
  - How do I know that what I’m doing is effective for children and families, practical, cost efficient?
  - Is there research that says vertical case management is effective, wrap around services are effective, differential response is effective?
  - Do I belong to any professional organizations?
  - Are there any conferences/educational forums that I can attend to learn more about evidence based practice or evidence informed practice
  - Do I know about the most recent research related to my practice?
  - What does current research say about family visitation, team decision making, family group conferencing?
  - Am I providing my clients with the best service(s) possible?
  - What evidence based programs, services, interventions are available to clients and families? Am I familiar with the California Evidence Based Clearinghouse?
  - What methods am I using to engage clients? How do I know these are effective?
  - What more can I do to inform my colleagues and management about evidence based practice?

- Social work staff enter data into CWS/CMS and AFCARS that is accurate, timely, and complete
  - Am I compliant with full utilization?
  - Do I complete my case plans on time?
  - Do I complete my court reports on time?
  - Do I complete my contacts on time? Is the information correct in my contact notes?
    - My contacts reflect that fact that I engage clients?
  - Are my placements up to date? Are the addresses correct?
  - Have I ended my placement episodes correctly?
  - Do I need to do any case closures?
  - Do I need to complete the AFCARS tool?
o Are there any Native American children on my caseload and is this fact noted in CWS/CMS?
o Does my supervisor need to complete any system approvals?
o I feel confident that my documentation is complete?

**Supervisory perspective**

- Supervisors ask themselves:
  - What am I doing?
  - Why am I doing it?
  - How do I know that what I’m doing is effective?
  - Do I belong to any professional organizations?
  - Are there any conferences/educational forums that I can attend to learn more about evidence based practice or evidence informed practice?
  - Do I know about the most recent research related to my practice?
  - What evidence based programs, services, interventions are available to clients and families?
  - How am I personally contributing to the evidence based movement?

- Supervisors enter data into CWS/CMS and AFCARS that is accurate, timely, and complete
  - Do I need to complete any system approvals?
  - Do I need to complete any documentation for workers who are on vacation or on leave?
  - Am I covering for another supervisor whereby I may need to complete CWS/CMS documentation?
  - Do I make periodic checks to make sure that my supervisees’ documentation is accurate, timely and complete?
  - Do my workers know about the AFCARS tool and are they using it correctly?
  - Am I familiar with NCANDS? CEBC?

- Supervisors work with supervisees to ensure data are accurate, timely, and complete
  - Do I have supervision with my supervisees regularly?
  - Do we discuss the importance of data integrity in supervision?
  - During supervision with supervisee, do I review Safe Measures reports?
  - Do I have unit meetings with my supervisees regularly?
  - Do we discuss the importance of data integrity in unit meetings?
  - During unit meetings with supervisees, do I review Safe Measures reports?
  - Are the workers in my unit familiar with Safe Measures and the Center for Social Services Research (CSSR)?
  - Do I discuss areas for improvement with my workers?

- Supervisors analyze data and reports from CWS/CMS, Safe Measures, CSSR
  - How does the data in CWS/CMS inform me about my practice, organizational policies and future organizational planning?
  - I use the data from CWS/CMS to make practice decisions?
I discuss data findings from CWS/CMS with my supervisees, other supervisors and agency management?

How does the data in Safe Measures inform me about my practice, organizational policies and future organizational planning?

I use the data from Safe Measures to make practice decisions?

I discuss data findings from Safe Measures with my supervisees, other supervisors and agency management?

How does the data in CSSR inform me about my practice, organizational policies and future organizational planning?

I use the data from CSSR to make practice decisions?

I discuss data findings from CSSR with my supervisees, other supervisors and agency management?

- Supervisors inform managers and directors about data consistencies and inconsistencies
  - Are their planning meetings in my agency?
  - How do we address data integrity issues?
  - Is there a policy/directive from management about rectifying data inconsistencies?
  - Am I familiar with program issues in my county that may impacting data integrity?
    - Our agency has a hiring freeze, there is no one to enter the data into CWS/CMS
    - I know my unit is completing contacts, but they’re not entering them into CWS/CMS
    - The staff member covering a certain caseload has been away on medical leave; this is why the placements haven’t been updated in CWS/CMS

Management perspective

- Managers and Directors enter data into CWS/CMS and AFCARS that is accurate, timely, and complete (if applicable)
  - Our agency has a hiring freeze, what can I do to help with data entry?
    - Can I enter data myself?
    - Shall I delegate the data entry to someone else?
  - There are supervisors on leave, is there anything that I can do to help with data entry?
  - How can I support the agency to make sure that we have data integrity?

- Managers and Directors work with supervisors to ensure data are accurate, timely, and complete
  - Do I have supervision with my managers regularly?
  - Do we discuss the importance of data integrity in supervision?
  - Is data integrity discussed in management meetings?
  - Is there a strategy/directive from management to agency personnel with suggestions for maintaining data integrity
Managers and Directors analyze data and reports from CWS/CMS, Safe Measures, and CSSR

- How does the data in CWS/CMS inform me about my practice, organizational policies and future organizational planning?
- I use the data from CWS/CMS to make practice decisions?
- I discuss data findings from CWS/CMS with supervisors and agency management?
- How does the data in Safe Measures inform me about my practice, organizational policies and future organizational planning?
- I use the data from Safe Measures to make practice decisions?
- I discuss data findings from Safe Measures with supervisors and agency management?
- How does the data in CSSR inform me about my practice, organizational policies and future organizational planning?
- I use the data from CSSR to make practice decisions?
- I discuss data findings from CSSR with supervisors and agency management?

Managers and Directors analyze their specific county data paying close attention not to make comparisons to counties that are different in demographics, size, scope, practices, policies, etc.

Managers and Directors work with the state and federal government to devise programs and policies that involve the outcomes for children and families

- Is my county PIP complete?
- What role did I have in completing the county PIP?
- What role will I have in delegating tasks to staff related to PIP strategies?
- Has my agency communicated the importance of improving child welfare outcomes to staff?
- Do I have a personal contact name and person of someone at CDSS?
- Am I on any state and federal committees?
- Am I familiar with NCANDS? CEBC?
Managers/Directors:
- Enter data (?)
- Review CWS/CMS, Safe Measures, and the CSSR
- Work with the state to ensure data integrity
- Organization development and planning

Supervisors:
- Enter data
- Review CWS/CMS, Safe Measures, and the CSSR
- Inform supervisees and management about data integrity
- Work with management for organizational development and planning

Social Work Staff:
- Enter data that is **ACCURATE, TIMELY, and COMPLETE**
Data Analysis
A FOSTER CHILD living in Napa County is in greater danger of being abused in foster care than anywhere else in the Bay Area, according to a county-by-county comparison of various quality-of-life measurements.

A foster child in Contra Costa County has the best chance of being adopted within two years of entering the system. A child in Alameda County is least likely to receive regular visits from a social worker.

In San Francisco -- where there are more children in foster care per capita than anywhere else in the state -- a child faces the grimmest outcomes.

According to data compiled by the National Center for Youth Law and previewed to The Chronicle, San Francisco ranks 55 out of 58 counties when it comes to state and national performance measures focused on safety and permanence.

These vast disparities underscore what is wrong with the state's disjointed foster-care system. For the 80,000 young people in foster care, the levels of care -- and hope for the future -- are often a matter of geography. This benign neglect of state responsibility to its foster children is a disgrace. Child Welfare Services publishes and distributes these data quarterly to the counties as a result of the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act of 2001. The performance indicators included the number of children in foster care, rates of abuse, length of time for reunification with birth parents and adoption rates.

Children's need for a safe, stable and permanent home does not change depending on where they live. But the state lacks a fundamental commitment to such consistency. In fact, the report is accompanied by an admonition by Child Welfare Services: "It is important that counties not draw comparisons to performance in other counties or even the state as a whole due to differences in demographics, resources, and practice." We beg to differ. "Why gather data if you're not going to use it to improve services?" asked Curtis L. Child, senior attorney for the Oakland-based National Center for Youth Law. "The state and the counties have never set out a comparison to see how counties are performing between one another. This is exactly what you need to be using performance outcomes for, to find out which youth you can expect to be in safer conditions and which ones are at risk."

In the Bay Area, you can expect those in Contra Costa County -- which ranks No. 8 overall -- to be far better off than those in San Francisco, which is home to 2,107 foster youth.

"San Francisco is more urbanized and there's more of a concentration of severe urban poverty than Contra Costa," said Frank Mecca, executive director of the County Welfare Directors Association. "Families in crisis in Benicia (in Solano County) are different from families in crisis in the Bayview," said San Francisco Human Services Director Trent Rhorer. "These are families that are dealing with the stresses of community violence, crowded public housing, drug trade, domestic violence and inter-generational poverty."

Everyone agrees that under-funding on the state and federal levels is a problem, but there are counties that manage to perform better with the same or even fewer resources than poorly performing counties.

Los Angeles County, for example, which faces serious issues of poverty and urbanization and has a far higher child population, performs substantially higher than San Francisco in areas of safety and permanence.

"If you have two kids, you don't turn to one and say, 'I don't expect you to graduate,' " said Jennifer Rodriguez, legislative and policy coordinator for the California Youth Connection and a former foster youth. "As a parent -- and that's what the state is to these kids -- you expect every child you raise to graduate and you make sure that you do everything you can to make that happen. Here, it just all depends on where you live, and that's not acceptable."
Recognizing San Francisco's dire need for improvement, Mayor Gavin Newsom last week announced a plan to use a new $894,000 state grant to help foster families. The funds will be used to contract with nonprofit agencies that will help each family deal with such issues as drug abuse, alcoholism, unemployment and mental health. San Francisco was also granted permission to spend foster-care funds more flexibly. For example, $5,000 spent on placing a foster child in a group home can now be spent on keeping the child at home or with a relative and providing services to stabilize the family. San Francisco Supervisor Sophie Maxwell last week announced the formation of a foster-care task force in San Francisco and a new ordinance that requires the group to meet with the Board of Supervisors every six months.

"I'm not going to make excuses," said Newsom. "We've got to do a better job. When I went into office, I focused on two things: crime and homelessness. What I noticed in both areas was a high number of foster kids. "We've got to get our house in order. It would be foolish for us not to address this problem." While Newsom's pledge to address San Francisco's inadequacies is welcome, it's time for the state to dedicate the resources -- and to install an overarching level of accountability -- to give foster children throughout the state a safe and stable home and the skills to succeed when they leave the system. As a state, we may be divided by county lines, but these children -- our children -- deserve our undivided attention.

CHART:

Foster care varies by county

Under the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB636), counties receive quarterly data reports on their outcomes of safety, permanence and well-being of children in the child welfare system. The National Center for Youth Law has compiled these data, along with federal measure outcomes, and have ranked each county (1 through 58) according to these scores, showing a wide disparity throughout the state.

Statewide Number of children in foster care

| Rank | County   | Number of children in foster care (
| Rank | County   | Number of children in foster care | 1,000 children) |
|------|----------|----------------------------------|
| 1    | Marin    | 1.9                              |
| 8    | Contra Costa | 6.9                            |
| 8    | Solano   | 6                                |
| 22   | San Mateo | 2.9                             |
| 24   | Sonoma   | 4.3                              |
| 24   | Santa Clara | 4.6                           |
| 26   | Alameda  | 9.7                              |
| 36   | Napa     | 4.3                              |
| 55   | San Francisco | 17.9                        |

Editor's note: These rankings were based on combined averages of various state and federal measures focused on outcomes for each county.

Source: National Center for Youth Law, Child Welfare Reports for California from UC Berkeley's Center for Social Services

The Chronicle

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Section: EDITORIAL

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WHEN AB636, the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act, was signed into law in 2001, then-Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg, a Sacramento Democrat, knew it was just the beginning.

By requiring Child Welfare Services to publish and distribute quarterly reports on each county, the law shifted the state's focus on foster care from processes in the system to actual outcomes for foster youth. The performance indicators include the number of children in foster care, rates of abuse, length of time for reunification with birth parents and adoption rates.

Five years later, the research has highlighted an appalling lack of consistency from county to county.

"Now it's time to use that data, do the comparisons and see where we're failing," said Steinberg. "Now comes the accountability."

But the state would rather not do that. In fact, included in each quarterly report is an admonition by Child Welfare Services: "It is important that counties not draw comparisons to performance in other counties or even the state as a whole due to differences in demographics, resources and practice."

During Tuesday's hearing before the Assembly's Select Committee on Foster Care, the state reiterated its lack of commitment to address these inconsistencies among 58 counties.

During her testimony, Barbara Needell, principal investigator and research specialist for Child Welfare Services said, "County rankings on individual measures give us no information at all on how a site has improved over time."

Of course, we don't suggest that county comparisons replace all data sets, but they can be used to supplement them. By seeing how counties fare in relation to other counties similar in size, the state can easily identify which areas appear to be succeeding -- and failing -- and use that information to implement best practices in counties that perform poorly.

Also serving on the panel was Curtis L. Child, a senior attorney for the Oakland-based National Center for Youth Law, who, for more than a year, has worked on a county-by-county comparison report using the data collected by the state.

"The data really demonstrates that the levels of safety, permanence and stability are purely an accident of geography," said Child.

Child presented pieces of the data table from the National Center for Youth Law's forthcoming report. Among the findings:

- Foster children in San Francisco are 50 percent more likely to be abused or neglected within one year of an earlier abuse than children in Los Angeles County, and nearly 200 percent more likely than children in Monterey County.

- Foster children in Fresno County are three times more likely to remain in foster care for more than a year than in Sacramento County.

- Foster children in San Francisco are five times more likely to be abused in foster care than in Alameda County; and children in Imperial County are 14 times more likely to be abused in foster care than those in San Mateo County.
In addition to its refusal to acknowledge the data's warning signs, the state has also failed to establish state mandates, such as the federal performance standards, which was required by AB636.

As a result, Child's report shows only how counties fare against the state average, rather than how close to or far from they are to reaching the state requirement.

In an impressive legislative package presented by Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, Assemblywoman Karen Bass, D-Baldwin Vista (Los Angeles County), the committee and various youth advocate groups last week, Bass proposed the Child Welfare Leadership and Performance Accountability Act of 2006 (AB2216).

If passed into law, this would address the lack of coordination among state and county agencies, which has led to the vast inconsistencies in services. It would also create a structure for leadership and accountability for all who provide foster-care services by calling on the state to create a more unified system, focusing on counties, courts and the state.

The data speak volumes.

In order for counties to improve and be held accountable, the state must first establish performance standards and encourage the constructive comparison of counties. In addition, AB2216 must pass to ensure that the fate of each foster child in California is based on these overall measures, and not by the county lines in which they live.

*Our previous editorials on foster care can be found under "Chronicle campaigns" at sfgate.com/opinion.*

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BROKEN PROMISES:
California’s Inadequate and Unequal Treatment of its Abused and Neglected Children

The state has a duty to care for and protect the children that the state places into foster care, and as matter of public policy, the state assumes an obligation of the highest order to ensure the safety of children in foster care.

— THE DUTY TO FOSTER CHILDREN REAFFIRMATION ACT
BROKEN PROMISES:
California's Inadequate and Unequal Treatment
of its Abused and Neglected Children

prepared by the
National Center for Youth Law
April 2006
This report was prepared by the National Center for Youth Law

National Center for Youth Law

The National Center for Youth Law (NCYL) is a national, non-profit organization that uses the law to improve the lives of poor children. NCYL works to ensure that low-income children have the resources, support, and opportunities they need for a healthy and productive future. Much of NCYL’s work is focused on poor children who are additionally challenged by abuse and neglect, disability, or other disadvantage.

NCYL focuses its work in four areas:

- Safety, Stability, and Well-Being of Abused and Neglected Children
- Quality Health and Mental Health Care
- Financial Stability for Low-Income Families and Children
- Juvenile Justice
Executive Summary

More than 100,000 children were victims of abuse or neglect in California in 2004. During the same period, nearly 39,000 children in California were removed from their homes and placed in foster care — an average of more than 100 children every day. Some spend just a few days in foster care, but many will remain for years or their entire childhoods.

Today, there are approximately 82,000 foster children in California — 20 percent of all foster children in the nation, and the largest foster care population of all 50 states.

In FY 2005-06, California will spend a staggering $4.7 billion on child welfare and foster care services, drawn from state, county, and federal funds.

When parents cannot or will not care for their children, the government assumes the role of parent and is responsible for children's safety and well-being. This Report seeks to answer the question: How well is the state caring for its most vulnerable children? Is California a responsible parent?

A County System

County child welfare agencies are granted extraordinary powers. They investigate child abuse reports, remove children from their homes without prior court approval, and determine where and with whom a child shall live. They can change a child's placement repeatedly without any accountability, decide what school a child will attend, and when, where, and how often a child is permitted to visit his or her family. They select the child's physician and therapist. Finally, these county agencies decide what parents must do in order to regain custody of their children. With this extraordinary power comes extraordinary responsibilities. The data reported here provide evidence that counties are not fulfilling their responsibilities to all children.

Study Overview

The National Center for Youth Law examined key child welfare outcomes that indicate whether California's 58 counties are protecting child abuse victims and meeting the needs of children in foster care. Our Report is based upon 12 performance measures — an equal number of federal and state measures that address the six areas listed below. The state measures were established as a part of California's 2001 legislative mandate (AB 636) for greater accountability among county child welfare programs. The federal measures are used by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) to determine state compliance with federal mandates for child safety, stability, and permanency, and states are sanctioned if they do not meet federal performance standards. The measures are:

- Recurrence of Abuse or Neglect
- Incidence of Child Abuse and/or Neglect in Foster Care
- Foster Care Re-entries
- Stability of Foster Care Placements
- Length of Time to Reunification
- Length of Time to Adoption

These outcome measures provide a gauge to determine how well children are being protected and, when they enter foster care, whether they are moved promptly back to a safe home, whether it be with their biological parents, a relative, adoptive parents, or other permanent placement. For those children who remain in care longer, the measures show whether a county has provided that child with a stable placement. Finally, by tracking the rate at which children re-enter care, the measures provide some indication of whether children are being returned to their families too soon, or if families are not given enough support to allow parents to properly care for their children.

The information used in this Report is drawn from public information compiled by UC Berkeley's Center for Social Services Research from the state's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System. UC Berkeley has prepared quarterly reports on each county's performance on select outcome measures beginning in January 2004. The data presented here is taken from those reports, using each county's average performance based upon the most recent four quarterly reports. The data is publicly available on the DSS website at http://www.childsworld.ca.gov/CDSSCounty_1954.htm.
Findings

The data in this Report portray a county-run system that protects many children but fails to protect many others. Indeed, reported data show that every county fails to meet at least two federal outcome standards. Four counties that care for more than 12,000 children in care failed every federal measure. All too often, county agencies are failing to keep children safe. It appears that each child’s level of safety and well-being is an accident of geography, hinging on political boundaries rather than on his or her particular needs. Foster children in San Francisco are 50 percent more likely to be abused or neglected within a year of an earlier abuse than children in Los Angeles County, and nearly 200 percent more likely than children in Monterey County.

When counties fail in their responsibilities, children are left unprotected, suffer multiple abuses, and are shuttled from place to place. They grow up without a home or family, and leave the system lacking the skills and resources to live as healthy and independent adults.

Safety

Victims of child abuse and neglect in California are re-victimized at alarming rates. Nearly 4,000 children are victims of abuse or neglect within six months of the agency confirming an earlier abuse. More than 11,000 children are abused or neglected again within one year.

Each year, more than 450 children suffer abuse or neglect in foster care. More than one-third of these victims are age 5 or younger.

Only six of California’s 58 counties met the federal standard for repeat abuse. Every single large county — counties with more than 1,000 foster children — failed to meet the standard. In Sacramento, the worst performing of the large counties, more than one-third of the children suffering repeat abuse or neglect were age 5 or younger.

Stability

Only 14 of the 58 counties met or exceeded the federal standard. The most recent data reported for this measure indicates that more than 5,000 children had been shuttled through three or more placements during their first year in care.

Permanency

Many counties are failing the children they decide to return home. During the most recent period for which data are available, one of every 10 children placed in foster care had been in care at least once before and came back within one year of leaving care. Almost 4,000 children (3,950) came back into the system. More than one-third of the children (1,351) re-entering care were age 5 or younger.

The Unequal Protection of Children

The poor outcomes for children in the state child welfare system are not limited to one region or group of counties. Even within the same region and among contiguous counties, the data reflect wide disparities in performance.

Fewer cases do not necessarily lead to better performance. Between 2002 and 2004, the number of substantiated child abuse cases in San Francisco dropped from 1,385 to 1,240 children. The number of children entering care decreased from 495 to 383, and the average daily foster care population was down more than 200 children from 2,287 to 2,070. During this same time period, recurrence of abuse or neglect increased, the rate of abuse in foster care was virtually unchanged, multiple placements of children in foster care increased slightly, and the percent of children re-entering foster care increased by 35 percent.

An examination of six Bay Area counties illustrates how contiguous counties provide widely differing levels of protection and care. Contra Costa is in the top best performing counties in the state, Alameda and Marin
are in the middle, and San Francisco is near the bottom. Only six other counties in the state performed worse than San Francisco.

The poor outcomes for children in the state child welfare system are not limited to one region or group of counties. Even within the same region and among contiguous counties, the data reflect wide disparities in performance.

During the last three years, the foster care caseloads of every Bay Area county have decreased. The number of substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect also went down in all but two counties — Santa Clara (2,838 to 2,398) and San Mateo (692 to 743). Meanwhile, the rate of abuse/neglect recurrence has gone up in Santa Clara, San Francisco, Alameda, and San Mateo counties, but dropped significantly in Contra Costa and Marin counties.

Children who have been in foster care in San Francisco county are much more likely to be in stable placements than children in Alameda county. The gap is substantial. While more than 80 percent of foster children in San Francisco are in their first or second placement at the one-year point, only about 55 percent in Alameda County have had similar stability.

**Conclusion**

The figures and percentages in each one of the charts in this Report represent real children who depend solely upon county child welfare agencies for care and protection. Those figures paint a bleak picture of what life is like for many child abuse victims and children in foster care.

In addition to the emotional and physical toll on tens of thousands of children, the state's failure to provide children with safety and stability exposes it to serious financial liability. Foster care and other child welfare services provided by California state and county agencies are funded in large part with federal tax dollars. This year, California received more than $2.3 billion in federal funds for child welfare services. In return for that money, California must provide a certain level of protection and services to child abuse victims and foster children. Unless California improves its performance, federal penalties of almost $60 million may be imposed in 2007.

In September 2002, the federal government conducted a review of the state's child welfare system. The review found that California failed to meet all six of the federal standards. The state was required to submit a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) and remains under federal review until at least April 2007.

While the state has claimed recent improvements in its child welfare system, the pace of those improvements has been slow and their continuation uncertain. While AB 636 has led to the counties' adoption of plans for further improvement, the promise of AB 636 was more than just a plan. It was a promise that abused and neglected children would receive greater protection, and a stable and permanent home. It was a promise that their lives would be helped, not further harmed, by the state's intervention. That promise needs to be kept to this generation of children, not delayed to the next.
Different related outcomes:

- Re-entry rates are consistently lower.
- LS entry rates are lower.

Different families and children served:

- Foster children in Fresno CO are 3 times more likely to remain in FC for more than a year than Sacramento.
- "Foster children in Fresno CO are 3 times more likely to remain in FC for more than a year than Sacramento."

Applies to Oranges