This document is an extract of a larger publication.

civilgrandjury.org is a project of UnGovr.org, a US-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to government transparency and public accountability.

WHO IS PROTECTING THE CHILDREN IN TULARE COUNTY?

BACKGROUND

California's foster care system has thousands of children of all ages who are in need of temporary and/or permanent out-of-home care due to exploitation, parental neglect and/or abuse of some nature. Children can stay in a foster care home for weeks or years depending on the situation and need. Foster parents are expected to provide stable and supportive living conditions; to arrange for medical and dental care, education and encourage positive relationships for these children who, for whatever reason, cannot live with their birth parents. Some children will need these temporary homes to turn into permanent ones if they cannot reunite with their birth parents.

In Tulare County, foster parents receive financial assistance from Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) to help provide the basics, which include food, clothing and other material needs of the child placed in their care. Medical and dental care is arranged by the foster parent and paid for by Medi-Cal. The foster care program is administered by Child Welfare Services (CWS) a branch of the HHSA.

REASONS FOR INVESTIGATION

A review of past Grand Jury reports indicate that there has been no oversight or investigation conducted by the Grand Jury of the foster care program in Tulare County. With this knowledge and recent reports in south valley newspapers identifying the following existing problems in the County's foster care program:

- Children being placed in abusive or unsafe homes,
- Children receiving inadequate medical or mental health care,
- Children with poor school attendance records,
- Children unprepared for emancipation at age eighteen,

the 2009-2010 Tulare County Grand Jury chose to investigate this program.

PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

1. Interviewed foster care parents.
2. Interviewed CWS personnel.
3. Interviewed recently emancipated youths.
4. Interviewed Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers.
5. Interviewed group home providers.
6. Interviewed court personnel.
7. Reviewed relevant documents.
8. Visited relevant sites.

FINDINGS

1. A request was made to review random foster care case files, which was denie per Welfare and Institutions Code Sections 827 and 10850.

.

2. A request was made to ride along with CWS Social Worker to observe living conditions and caseworker interaction with foster parents and foster childrei which was denied per Welfare and Institutions Code Section 827 and 10850.

3. A request was made to attend juvenile court hearings dealing with custody issues, which was denied per Welfare and Institutions Code Section 827 and 10850.

4. CWS guidelines require monthly visits by caseworkers. This requirement was not met in all cases. Some cases went up to six months or longer without a visit by a Social Worker.

5. Mental health evaluations are not routinely performed prior to placing a child in a foster care home.

6. Visits to birth parents are often traumatic to the foster children resulting in disruptive behavior by the children.

7. There is little or no instruction given to emancipated youth, by Social Workers, on how to access medical services, social security, or monies for education.

8. On some occasions children are allowed to interview and help select their own foster parents.

9. CASA provides effective advocacy for foster care children.

10. Cuts to the State budget have resulted in the Independent Living Program (ILP) being eliminated.

11. The ILP provided instruction to foster children to prepare them for self-sufficiency. It included instruction in:
    a. furthering their education,
    b. daily living skills,
    c. seeking employment and
    d. financial literacy (including budgeting and maintaining bank accounts).

12. The ILP was very beneficial to the success of foster children becoming productive members of society.

CONCLUSIONS

The youth in Tulare County are a valuable and vulnerable asset, and every effort must be made to care for them to the best of the County's ability.
The way the regulations are written, the emphasis of foster care is in reunification, however the needs of the foster child should be paramount and should be the main focus in case management.

It is difficult to obtain the truth of how the foster care system operates and if there are any shortcomings in the system. The law prevents the Grand Jury from any contact with families or files, and those who know if the system is dysfunctional will not talk to the Grand Jury.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Perform mental health evaluations for all foster care children prior to placement.

2. Conduct foster care home visits monthly.

3. Conduct unannounced visits to foster care homes on a regular basis.

4. Prepare foster children for emancipation with more detailed information on the skills needed to succeed in life. Something more than just a brochure.

5. Utilize CASA services whenever a need is indicated.

6. Provide the Grand Jury with access to foster care records to monitor the performance of Social Workers and

ensure the health and safety of the children in foster care.

RESPONSES REQUIRED

Tulare County Board of Supervisors
Health and Human Services Agency, Agency Director, John Davis
Health and Human Services Agency, Deputy Director, Child Welfare Services,
Renee Smylie