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Economy & Efficiency Commission Presentation

Editorial Note: Although every effort has been made to insure the accuracy of the material in this presentation, the scope of the material covered and the discussions undertaken lends itself to the possibility of minor transcription misinterpretations.

**PRESENTATION BY
David Sanders, PhD
Director
Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services**

Topic: The Future Direction of the Department of Children and Family Services

July 10, 2003

Chairman Philibosian introduced Dr. Sanders and welcomed him to the Commission.

Dr. Sanders stated that he would like to briefly discuss the critical areas in the department and why he believes that these areas are important. From there he wanted to talk in some detail concerning the priorities that he has identified and about the immediate and long term challenges facing the department.

Dr. Sanders feels that the Child Welfare System is simple in many ways; it is the Federal, state or local agencies that have made it complicated. These complications have created internal and external confusion about what can be expected. The appropriate context is how the department operates as a public entity while fulfilling the public expectations concerning children. With the expectation being that children will not be abused when they come to the attention of the department, it is not unusual when abuse happens that the public is concern over how the County is functioning.

A secondary public concern expressed by Dr. Sanders is the expectation that children will not languish in foster care for years. It has become clear what happens to kids when they are left in the foster care system without a family. It is reasonable for the public to expect that the agencies will be able to implement the policies and practices that insure that this does not happen. These are the things that we have to get right, everything else is window dressing. That may be a strong statement, but unless we can make sure that kids are not hurt while in the care of the County and that they are not languishing in foster care, there is very little else that can be done to earn the public's confidence in the Department of Children and Family Services.

Dr. Sanders felt that the one thing that is required is to stay focused on the mission critical areas. Based upon his experience to date, it appears that in the past the department has had changing priorities without any real direction that would enable meaningful improvement. Those priorities did not adequately address the safety and care of the kids in the County's care, nor the concerns about foster care. The department has not had success in accomplishing either goal.

Priority 1:

The need to shorten the length of time that kids spend in the care of the County.

The County needs to seriously consider the length of time from placement to finalize adoptions for these children. Today this time is about 5 ½ years. It is clear that the County needs to find permanent families for these children.

Comparison of Los Angeles County to Other Jurisdictions

Dr. Sanders compared Los Angeles County to other jurisdictions relative to the length of time other children are under public care in Los Angeles County. Using almost any measurement criteria, other jurisdictions seem to be more successful at reunifying children quickly. In these jurisdictions after the placement discussion is made the resources were put in place to get the kids back to the family quickly. That does not happen in Los Angeles County and, thus, the length of time that the kids spend in care is extended. This approach is both costly and ineffective. Considering family reunification this is neither good for the child or the family.

The Area of Emancipation

The department currently has between 8000 to 9000 children under its care between the ages of 14 and 18 the goal for these children is emancipation. There needs to be a strong effort by the department to provide permanent families for these youth.

Priority 2:

Addressing the causes of the public concern that kids in the County's care are not going to be hurt

When the County intervenes by placing a child in foster care; there should be an expectation that the child will be safe. He pointed out that almost 10% of child investigations are reported back to the department within 6 months as compared to the national standard of 6%. Secondly, the rate of abuse in foster care in Los Angeles County is about four times higher than New York City or Illinois. We are obviously not doing the best job to keep kids in the County's care safe. The County definitely needs to improve in this area.

Priority 3:

We need to be able to offer resources that keep children safe in there homes

Dr. Sanders feels that the County needs to offer resources to keep children safe in their homes. Considering the 50,000 children that are currently being served in Los Angeles County, about 2/3 are out of home care. If you look at most successful jurisdictions that number is reversed with about 2/3 being served in the home. In discussing this with staff they say that they could keep kids at home if the resources were available. The County currently spends about \$750 million on out of home placement and \$26 million on family preservations services.

Other Challenges facing the Department

1. The County needs to have its social workers spend more time with the children to insure that they are safe. The standard practice of one visit per month is not adequate. What is required to accomplish this is not to hire new staff, but rather to look at how current employee's time is being allocated. (For example, of the 6600 positions allocated to the department, only 1800 are visiting families)
2. The work structure within the department has defused responsibilities in so many areas that it is unclear who is responsible for what work. The way the structure should work is to insure that the worker has sufficient information available to produce whatever is needed. If anything is lacking, the supervisor should be able to provide the missing information. The current departmental structure

requires a third person to evaluate the information in this case to determine what has happened. The primary issue revolves around responsibility; how it is assigned within the department and what type of tools are provided to people to accomplish those responsibilities. This can be accomplished by strengthening the region offices, together with the authority and responsibility existing within those offices.

3. Concerning emancipations, the department is structured to have the work accomplished at the regional office, but the regional offices feel that the responsibilities for emancipations and/or adoptions lie in other offices. The department needs to rethink how the work is structured, the work flow process, and the individuals who have overall responsibility for providing the best possible outcome for the children.

Commissioner Questions

Commissioner Fuhrman asked Dr. Sanders how he is proposing to decentralizing departmental responsibilities, bringing it back to the case worker. Dr. Sanders responded that the department is currently being driven by policies, rather than thinking of the work in the context of outcomes. Within the senior departmental management it is necessary to develop a higher priority in the areas of adoptions and emancipation. Departmental structure needs to strive to have each of the region administrators responsible for mission accomplishment. At this point outcomes can be measured within each region. Consideration can be given to such things as project timelines, the time necessary for each achievement, the number of children emancipated, and holding the region manager responsible for these programs.

Commissioner Padilla asked why the system imposed restrictions on people that are looking to adopt and have already been prescreened to work with kids. Dr. Sanders noted that the department is insuring that everyone adopting has been licensed as a foster care provider, although it still takes 15 months to do a home study. The department is considering combining those processes so that once approved applicants don't have to go through a separate adoption approval process. In addition, Commissioner Padilla noted that there should be someone that takes an interest in the child and the family.

Commissioner Oaks asked why the Los Angeles abuse rate was four times higher here than in New York City. Dr. Sanders stated that he feels that there are two reasons for the abuse rates being what they are in Los Angeles County:

1. The current contracts with family foster agencies do not mention rate of abuse. The existing contracting process does not articulate the County's expectations in a manner that would bring the issue into focus. New York was able to raise the awareness of this issue by identifying abuse as a priority and developing a contracting process that defined expectations with a set of outcomes.
2. The question is how to create a culture that considers the issue of abuse in terms of outcomes. Current contracts are based on the number of children served with no relationship to how well the agency is performing. In addition, the department must engage the foster family in the process.

Commissioner Lewis asked how the changes that are being proposed are being met by departmental staff. The department staff wants the process to work according to Dr. Sanders, but they don't seem to feel that it is currently working. One issue of concern is that the number of people that are seeing families is only 25-30 percent of the staff. To address this matter the department has created a labor management work group to review all social worker positions. The objective is to maximize the number of positions that will have contact with families.

Commissioner Hill asked about the average employment time of departmental employees and the culture that has been established over time. The courts also play a huge role in the process. Dr. Sanders agreed that departmental culture. To impact this somewhat Dr. Sanders noted that he had hired people in the department that have worked with him previously in the areas of budgeting, contracting, and human resources. These people will be able to provide another perspective on the management of the department and the means by which the organization's objective can be accomplished. Additionally, he would like to create more formal

structures comprised of outside people to begin to address the issue of internal culture.

Chairman Philibosian thanked Dr. Sanders for his presentation and the important information that he imparted to the Commission.

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