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Increasing Retention of Foster Resource Families

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Abstract

The Family and Children's Services at Monterey County Department of Social Services (MCDSS) works to ensure that children and youth can have permanent homes by returning to birth parents if safe to do so and/ or becoming adopted. Although, MCDSS: Family and Children's Services attempts to reunify and secure stability, too many children are aging out of the foster system without being reunified or adopted. Additionally, the MCDSS has faced challenges with retention of Resource Families (previously known as Foster Parents) in the FR process. This capstone consisted of an exploratory research project to understand barriers and opportunities in the working dynamics between Social Workers and Resource Families and the impact this has on Resource Families' retention. The research methodology included a survey distributed to parents in the FR Cluster Group and observation of participants in the FR Cluster Group. It is recommended that Social Workers assign Resources Families to attend beneficial groups based on observations during visits.

Keywords: Child Protective Services, Monterey County, Family Reunification, Resource Families

Agency and Communities Served

Monterey County Department of Social Services (MCDSS) provides resources to individuals who need support in the area of social services. The department consists of various services and offers different types of resources depending on the need of the individual. Family and Children's Services program offers the following services: child protective services, and adoption services for the Monterey County children and youth. The organization's mission is "to prevent the occurrence of child abuse and neglect. Service goals strive to keep children and youth safe and within the protection of a permanent family" (MCDSS, n.d.).

Another program offered by the agency is the Foster Care Services. Their cooperation and desire to help children in need of a home and a family is crucial. Foster parents are a very important source of care and support for children when they are not able to remain safely in their own homes. Foster parents help children through difficult times with love, comfort, and guidance. While in foster care a child receives food, clothing and shelter. Foster parents arrange for medical care as needed, and help children grow through educational, cultural and social experiences (MCDSS, n.d.).

In the social services department, collaboration, communication and retention are crucial in order to function successfully. Unfortunately, collaboration and communication between the Family Reunification (FR) Social Workers (SW) and the Resource Parents also known as foster parents has experienced challenges. There have been misunderstandings and complaints from both parties, leading them to unpleasant situations which in turn influence poor retention.

For this capstone different organizations partnered with the Family Children Services (FCS). Hartnell College, Children Behavioral Health (CBH) and Door-to-Hope. The

organizations came together to set into motion the FR Cluster Group to establish support and further assistance to the Resource Parents that have needs the agency has failed to target.

FCS strives to help children and youth and keep them safe in the protection of a permanent family. The FR unit works concurrently with foster youth and parents, when the children are removed from their birth parents, they are given a chance to get their children back. However, the children will be temporarily removed and placed with a Resource Parent.

CBH department targets population who have seriously emotionally disturbed children and youth who are in or at risk of out of home placement or who are qualified under special education (County of Monterey Health Department, 2018) and who meet medical necessity.

Problem Description

As stated previously, the MCDSS reported experiencing challenges with retention of Resource Families in the FR process. Although, the MCDSS strives to secure stability, too many Children are aging out of Foster System without being reunifies or adopted. The primary causes contributing to the agencies problem seems to be the lack of Bilingual support groups, the communication challenges between social workers and resource families as well as Resource Families don't feel part of the team. The consequences to the MCDSS primary causes that contribute to the problem are Hispanic Residents 58.3% - 42.6% are Spanish speakers (2015). (See Appendix A).

According to the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, ten-percent of foster youth age out of the system nationally without being reunified or adopted (n.d.). The Micro implications of higher caregiver retention is that children will experience less placement disruptions, be maintained in a stable and safe home and attach to their caregivers. The Family and Children's Services goal is to keep children and youth safe and within the protection of a

permanent family is not being met. Communication is an important tool to have as a Social worker. However, there are communication challenges between Social Workers and Resource Families, they are not feeling part of the team. When the agency is losing Resource Families it limits the chances of a child who was not successfully reunified to have a safe home or acquire permanency in their lives. If not addressed, though in many states, including California, the age in order to receive services have been extended from 18 years of age to 26 years of age can create challenges (Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, n.d.). Youth begin to experience inadequate housing, inadequate education, substance abuse, early parenthood, physical and mental health problems as well as involvement with the criminal justice system.

According to the Child Welfare Staff and Foster Parents; Team Approach (Powerpoint, n.d.) the Resource Families relationship with the children during the family reunification process helps build alliances with the birth parents and those who are a huge part of the child's life. By the Resource Families being available to provide a safe home to the children and meet their basic needs, helps the children build their self-esteem. The role of the Resource Families are of those that involved being temporary parents, mentors, and teachers to the children. However, the process of reunifying can also interrupt what has been already implemented in the child's life. These children are most likely to feel unwanted all over again, and abandoned when the time has come to return to birth parents if safe to do so.

Project Description & Implementation

This project's purpose was to further understand the challenges and opportunities in the communication dynamics between SW and Resource Families and identify current relationship issues. A survey was developed for the Resource Families to provide their feedback about the activities being offered during the sessions and assess their resource awareness. This project was

implemented as follows: the survey was distributed on the first session that took place on

January 2019, the survey was intended to be distributed during the sessions of February and

March. Once the feedback was collected and the data analyzed the results were to be used to

inform needs and opportunities for implementation in future FR Cluster Group Sessions in 2019.

The FR Cluster Group partnering organizations that allowed for the capstone project to collect

research were Becky Pimentel who is the supervisor for the Placement Resource and Support

Unit (RSU) will oversee the Retention Workgroup monthly sessions. Eva Ortiz who is the

Supervisor for the Family Reunification Placement Unit (FRP) will oversee the FR Cluster

Group sessions. Family and Children's Services department, Hartnell College and Children

Behavioral Health department. The Agency clients and community members involved were the

FR Cluster Group, this group will be open to current Resource Families as well as for potentially

interested individuals who want to become Resource Families. It also involved the FR social

workers, Hartnell College students, and overall the Community.

Findings & Results

      FR Cluster Group had three sessions were the surveys were going to be distributed. The

first session was in January 2019. There were fifteen participants registered to attend the session,

however, only six individuals attended and only four filled out the survey. The survey consisted

of six questions (See Appendix D and E); question number one asked the families if they had any

concerns on becoming resource families and three out of the four answered "not applicable"

because they are already a resource family. Question number two asked if they had any concerns

about their experience as Resource Families and three out of four answered "disagree" and one

agreed to have concerns. Question number three asked families to list resources that they knew

were available to them and all four answered about resources that are available to them correctly.

On question number four it was asked what the Resource Families understand about the Family Reunification process, all four participants answered by explaining how the main goal is to reunify children with their birth parents. On question number five it was asked if the Resource Families feel like their opinions and concerns are heard by the MCDSS office, the responses were as followed; two out of the four answered "strongly agreed" from the other two surveys one answered "agree" and the other left the survey blank. The last question on the survey, the Resource Families were asked what were their expectations from the FR Cluster Group, the question was answered as followed; two of the surveys were left blank and the other two answered "support" and "to help navigate system".

Discussion

The low attendance to the groups prevented a high number of responses to the survey, therefore the findings are limited to just the four respondents. It is unclear why turnout was so low, initially fifteen parents confirmed their attendance. It would be worth studying the reason for the low attendance as the reason for it may be a clear indicator of the lack of communication between families and social workers. The parents that attended were already very knowledgeable of the system because they have a history of collaboration with the department. Three of them are still resource parents and one of them used to work for the agency.

Since three of the parents that answered the survey were involved with the agency, their responses were very positive. The only respondent that had no prior involvement with the agency was the only one that expressed concerns about the process and a desire for more information and communication. It is difficult to make inferences from just one response, but the low attendance combined with the response of the only new parent leads me to believe that there is

still a lot of work needed to engage resource parents and improve communication and relationships between social workers and parents.

Project Assessment Process

<u>Expected Outcomes</u>

The expected outcome for this capstone project was to understand the barriers and opportunities between Social Workers and Resource Families and how it impacts Resource Families' Retention and for the FR unit to use the findings to improve future cluster groups.

A survey was distributed to assess the effectiveness of the FR Cluster Group towards achieving the identified outcome. The survey was an exploratory research method meant to help learn about concerns the Resource Families may have towards their transition in the process and identify what resources they are familiar with and if they are using them. In the survey they were asked if the FR Cluster Group could was helpful to them.

Unfortunately, as described in the findings and discussion sections the survey did not offer conclusive findings. However, the low attendance to the groups should be an indicator that parent engagement is not strong and the agency needs specific steps to improve its recruiting and maintaining strategies. In this sense, the research part of the capstone did not offer much information about communication barriers, but the observations of low attendance did expose a larger issue.

Recommendations

Based on the experience and observation I would suggest two recommendations that could be beneficial to both the Resource Families and the Agency.

The first recommendation to increase participation in support groups and trainings would be to increase the required hours for the Resource Families from 12 hours to 20 hours per year. These hours could be easily spread through the year (each Cluster Group is about 2 hours therefore the 20 hours will be met on 10 months).

The second recommendation is to improve the relationship between Social Workers and Resource Families based on home visit observations. The Social Workers will learn about concerns the Resource Families are having and suggest and/or assign Resource Families to cluster support groups that will be educational, supportive and that will provide them guidance. This will indicate the Resource Families that they are being heard, and supported by their Social Worker.

Conclusion & Personal Reflection

This year-long research and report writing process and my personal and professional growth within this journey have taught me about the importance of collaboration, professional communication, organization, boundaries, and consistency. Professional communication (MLO 8) is crucial in child welfare. The act of miscommunicating can have a ripple effect between a case and the individuals involved. I have also learned that in agencies such as the MCDSS, collaboration (MLO 1) is the most important skill to have in child welfare. For example; Initial Intake, were allegations are made, depending on the gravity of the situation the reports are given a timeframe as to when the Social Worker should contact the individuals involved. What happens after the initial contact, the Social Worker with the case will collaborate with other units

to work on the safety plan for the children. The importance of all these agencies i.e., Family to Family, Mental Health Department, Hartnell College, etc. collaborating builds a stronger community within the organizations and the population entering their doors.

Through this project what I will remember every day and in ten-years which also happens to have been the most important lesson learnt was recognizing that there is always room for improvement. Unfortunately. We currently live in a time where people are afraid to seek resources and the experience I have gained, the knowledge I gathered, and the people I have met during this time have been life changing in this time I have develop professionally (MLO 9).

Future CHHS student interns entering senior year is exciting and terrifying at the same time. You might be worried about what you capstone project will be, and if you will be done on time, I can say that there is plenty of time to get the project done.

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Appendix A

Problem Model

Problem Model		
Project Title: Increasing Retention of Foster Resource Families		
Problem Statement: Too many Children are aging out of the Foster System without being reunified or adopted.		
CAUSES TO AGENCY PROBLEM	**AGENCY-SPECIFIC "MICRO-LEVEL" PROBLEM ADDRESSED BY PROJECT**	**CONSEQUENCES TO AGENCY**
• Lack of Bilingual support groups • Communication challenges between social worker and resource families. • Resource Families don't feel part of the team.	The retention of Resource Families during the Family Reunification process	• Hispanic Residents 58.3% - 42.6% are Spanish speakers (2015) • The Family and Children's Services goal to keep children and youth safe and within the protection of a permanent family is not being met.
CAUSES TO BROADER HEALTH PROBLEMS	**BROADER "MACRO-LEVEL" HEALTH/SOCIAL PROBLEM**	**CONSEQUENCES TO SOCIETY**
• Limited safe homes and permanency • Unsuccessful reunification	Too many Children are aging out of Foster System without being reunifies or adopted.	• Inadequate Housing • Inadequate Education • Early Parenthood • Substance Abuse • Physical and Mental Health Problems • Involvement with Criminal Justice System

Appendix B

Table 1. Scope of Work		
Title: Increasing Retention of Foster Resource Families		
Project description: An exploratory research project to understand barriers and opportunities in the working dynamic between Social Workers and Resource Families and the impact this had on Resource Families' Retention.		
Goal: Reduce Resource Families' Retention		
Primary objective of the project: Increase Resource Families & Social Workers communication and collaboration skills.		
Activities	**Deliverables**	**Timeline/deadlines**
1 Discuss capstone project ideas with mentor	Final capstone project idea approved	Oct 26, 2018
2 Develop survey to assess customer service	Final approved pre-/post Survey instruments	Nov -Dec 2018
5 Attend three 2.5-hour sessions Jan 14th, Feb 11th, March 4th, April 1st , 2019	Agenda, number of participants and topics discussed; what worked, what didn't work.	Jan-March 2019
8 Compile and analyze data; complete draft on report findings	Finding Report completed and submitted to mentor for approval	April 21, 2019
9 Complete reporting requirements	Final agency and capstone reports	April 26, 2019
10 Prepare capstone presentation in selected format	Present at Dress Rehearsal for grading (posters submitted)	April 26-May 3, 2019
11 Final preparation for Capstone Festival	Final presentation at Capstone Festival!!	May 15 or 16, 2019 (TBD)

Appendix C

Family Reunification Cluster Flyer (2019)

Appendix D

Family Reunification Cluster Group Survey

Family Reunification Cluster Group

1. Do you have any concerns about becoming Resource Parents? (Circle one, if you are already resource parents please answer N/A)

   Strongly Agree

   Agree

   Disagree

   Strongly Disagree

   Not Applicable

2. Do you have any concerns about your experience as Resource Parents? (Circle one, if you are **NOT** already resource parents please answer N/A)

   Strongly Agree

   Agree

   Disagree

   Strongly Disagree

   Not Applicable

3. Please list the resources that are available to you as Resource Parents and indicate which ones you currently use.

   _____Yes / No

   _____Yes / No

   _____Yes / No

   _____Yes / No

   _____Yes / No

4. What is your understanding about Family Reunification process? What are your feelings towards the matter?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

Appendix E

5. Do you currently feel your opinions and concerns are heard by our office? (Circle one)

Strongly Agree
Agree
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
Not Applicable

6. What are your expectations about the FR Cluster Group?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank You