

CARE OF CHILDREN IN GROUP HOMES

It was you, who showed me the way out
of the darkness, into a brighter
world where my heart floats free
like flowers...
on the wind.

—Marianne Gillispie

SUMMARY

The 1998–99 Orange County Grand Jury studied the care and services provided to the court dependent minors who are removed from their homes because of neglect or abuse and placed in group home foster care. The focus of the study was the services and programs for these minors before, during and after their stay at the group home. The Grand Jury looked into the level of service and care the minors are receiving and determined that the basic requirements of the foster child is being met—the child is in a safe environment and has food, shelter and clothing. The Grand Jury found that the next level of care, the emotional and developmental needs call for improvements; specifically:

- Provision and promotion of reading in the homes by acquiring an adequate library and providing a quiet, comfortable setting for reading.
- Staff turnover is destabilizing for the minors. Turnover could be a result of low pay and job dissatisfaction.
- Minors in group homes have fewer opportunities for socialization because of imposed restrictions.
- Special education needs of many of the children in foster care have not been properly identified and provided.
- The Independent Living Program does not focus on training for job acquisition skills adequately. Outside organizations that specialize in this training do not have adequate access to provide programs for these youths.
- The county needs to embark on a program modeled after the successful *Bridges to Independence* program in Los Angeles County. When a youth reaches 18 and leaves the

confines of a restrictive home environment, he faces the risk of homelessness, substance abuse, depression and crime. He leaves poorly prepared to cope.

- Support services for minors who are transferred to a less restrictive home are insufficient to prevent failed placements.

This is an opportune time to address these problems. The State is intensifying its monitoring and auditing program for all group homes. The county also is increasing its staff in order to do more thorough monitoring of the group homes. Part of that effort should be to examine the budgets of homes to see how group homes are allocating their resources. The monthly pay rate homes receive per child have been increased after being constant for many years. Finally, there are a number of creative programs being proposed to meet the needs of these at-risk children.

To effect improvements in group homes where the Social Services Agency (SSA) has no direct authority, the Grand Jury recommends that the SSA use the group home forums (monthly meetings with group home operators), the monitoring process and the leverage of the placement process.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Orange County, along with the other 57 counties in the State, is required by state law to provide care for minors in the county who come under protective custody of the juvenile court. Custody arises when the court determines that a child is at risk because of abuse or neglect at home and orders the removal of the child from that home. The county entity responsible for the care of these minors is the SSA. The county's entry point for the children who have been removed from home is the Orangewood Children's Home. This shelter, which has a 236 bed capacity, temporarily cares for the children until they can be placed in an appropriate facility. The SSA Children and Family Services Division selects the facilities, foster homes and group homes, that are to be responsible for the care of the minors. Frequently, these minors return to Orangewood as a result of a failed placement and then are sent to another group home. When the minor reaches 18 years of age, he is no longer the responsibility of the county and has to leave, often ill-equipped to cope with independent living.

The Grand Jury, as part of its responsibilities, may investigate and/or report on county programs involving minors such as protective services, foster care, group homes and child abuse services. The purpose of this study was to examine the operation and services provided by group homes, the support services the group home children receive, and the effectiveness of the SSA oversight of group homes.

METHOD OF STUDY

The Grand Jury attended Juvenile Justice Commission meetings, interviewed county officials, SSA personnel and the State Department of Social Services Agency personnel. Grand Jury members visited a number of group homes to inspect facilities and speak to staff. Grand Jury members interviewed private organizations and reviewed books, articles and Internet information. The Grand Jury examined the budgets of group homes in Orange County to analyze asset allocations.

BACKGROUND

In 1996, almost 30,000 families were entered into the child abuse registry because of child abuse or neglect. More than 2,000 of these cases required the County Social Services Agency to provide the minors with emergency shelter care and were entered into the county foster care system. The remainder was returned home or to a relative. Generally, the children who are removed are taken to Orangewood emergency shelter. The minors stay at Orangewood an average of thirty days until Juvenile Court has a hearing (under Section 300 of the *Welfare and Institutions Code*). The Court determines whether to send them home or to place them in foster care. Currently about 3900 children are in court ordered, out-of-home placement under the supervision of SSA. About 700 are in group homes and about 2000 in foster homes. Their stays at these facilities can vary greatly, from a few months to years. The goal in most cases is reunification with parents or a relative if it is in the best interest of the child. When reunification is not possible, adoption is the goal. In reality most of the group home minors, especially teens, will neither be adopted nor placed in a foster home. These minors will remain in a group home until age 18, or until high school graduation. The challenges for group homes are to make the minor's experience as positive and productive as possible and to prepare him for emancipation.

COUNTY RESPONSIBILITY

The county has a difficult and challenging task to carry out its responsibility for placing the dependent minor in foster care. Part of that task is matching a minor's needs to a group home with the appropriate services. After the placement, the assigned social worker visits the child at least once per month and files periodic reports with the court on the minor's progress. A resource specialist visits each home three times a year to assess and monitor their program. If appropriate, reunification efforts continue. The SSA carries out periodic health and safety inspections of the homes but is not involved with budgetary and resource allocation. The state will be performing more frequent and intensive inspections as well as yearly financial audits in accordance with new state legislation, SB 933 (1998). The county is increasing staff to more rigorously monitor the group homes.

The county provides mental health services for the group home children who require it. Mental health providers, psychologists and psychiatrists, provide these services. A new program to accomplish this is now administered through a provider group to these minors.

GROUP HOME RESPONSIBILITIES AND SERVICES

The group home is a non-profit business licensed by the state to provide specific care services to dependent minors. The responsibilities of a group home for a minor are spelled out in a contract entered into by the county and the home before a placement occurs. The contract includes provisions for food, shelter, clothing, supervision, in-house counseling and various programs. Medical and mental health services are provided, but it is the responsibility of the home staff to see that appointments are made and kept. The group home has specific reporting obligations spelled out in the contract. A significant problem arises when a minor returns to Orangewood from a failed placement. When the returnee rejoins the other children and continues to act out, it negatively affects the other minors. A solution to this would be to separate the returnees and provide them with special help until they can be integrated. Another problem the group home staff has is

insufficient information regarding the child at initial placement. This makes it difficult to determine the needed care.

PROFILE OF GROUP HOMES

The county uses some 168 licensed group homes. Most are within the county and some are located in adjacent counties. The homes are operated by 61 entities; some operating just one home while others operate as many as 23 homes. The capacity of the homes range from 6 to 148 minors. The typical home is a modest three-bedroom home in a quiet residential neighborhood, with six minors, two per bedroom.

The group homes the Grand Jury visited were clean and well maintained. The meals were planned with nutritious menus; refrigerators and pantries were well stocked. There were VCRs, videos, and some had computers. Recreational equipment varied. One aspect the Grand Jury found generally wanting were books and other reading material in the homes. It is important for these minors to have reading material close at hand, because reading is an important element for their educational development. Computer availability is also important.

GROUP HOME STAFF

Typical group home staff consists of direct care providers, a house manager and a case manager. The direct care providers are required to have a high school diploma, and frequently are college students or recent college graduates. The care providers supervise the minors in the home, see that the minor gets to school and back, supervise the children's chores, and escort the minors to all off-site activities. State law requires this close supervision. A high staff turnover, typically measured in months, is a recognized problem because of the destabilizing effect it has on the children. Some homes do better than others in retaining staff. The factors contributing to turnover are pay, work environment, responsibilities, and training opportunities.

The house manager is responsible for the operation of the household—the food, maintenance, etc. The case manager, who is usually a graduate social worker, is in charge of personnel, counsels the minors, maintains discipline and plans the minor's activities. Alternatively, the home may have a staff clinician that does the counseling—one-on-one as well as group therapy.

The larger, corporate group homes have a more structured organization that sometimes results in a more distant relationship between managers and care providers. When the case manager divides his time between the corporate headquarters, the child and the staff, the children's immediate needs may not be met.

ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE GROUP HOME

As in any organization, the effectiveness of a group home is determined by the quality and dedication of the operators and staff. The attention and time the operator gives to staff and home are critical. One of the key elements is the stability of the staff as they are the surrogate parents of the children. A high staff turnover, unfortunately the norm, creates uncertainty and anxiety in children and reinforces the lack of permanence in their lives. Some group homes retain staff better than others.

The important elements that a home should provide a child are:

- **Connectedness**—to feel part of someone else's life,
- **Continuity**—to have a sense of belonging to another person over a period of time,
- **Dignity**—to feel worthy of respect and caring, and
- **Opportunity**—to have access to quality education, recreation, socialization and leisure.

An effective group home reflects all these qualities.

BUDGETS AND ASSET ALLOCATION

The funding for group home minors comes from a combination of federal, state and county sources. The monthly payment that a homes receives per child depends on a Rate Classification Level point system that the State Department of Social Services grants the home, (see Table 1) and is based on the staff qualifications and services that the home provides. The higher the Rate Classification Level of a home, the more intense the supervision and services the home provides in order to deal with the more troubled minors. For 1997–1998, these rates ranged from a low of \$2,067 for a Rate Classification Level 4 home to a high of \$5,013 for a Rate Classification Level 14 home. (These rates have been increased to \$2,191 and \$5,314, respectively.) The Rate Classification Level rating system is flawed in that it is based more on quantity rather than quality. The State Licensing Agency is making efforts to reform the Rate Classification Level system.

TABLE 1

GROUP HOME STANDARDIZED SCHEDULE OF MONTHLY RATES			
Rate Classification Level	Point Ranges	FY 1998-99 Standard Rates	FYs 1994-95 thru 1997-98 Standard Rates
1	Under 60	\$1,254	\$1,183
2	60-89	\$1,567	\$1,478
3	90-119	\$1,879	\$1,773
4	120-149	\$2,191	\$2,067
5	150-179	\$2,502	\$2,360
6	180-209	\$2,815	\$2,656
7	210-239	\$3,127	\$2,950
8	240-269	\$3,440	\$3,245
9	270-299	\$3,751	\$3,539
10	300-329	\$4,064	\$3,834
11	330-359	\$4,375	\$4,127
12	360-389	\$4,688	\$4,423
13	390-419	\$5,003	\$4,720
14	420 & Up	\$5,314	\$5,013

These rates may appear high, but homes are required to provide: staffing for 24 hour care, nutritious meals, a clean household, professional counseling and a bedroom for every two minors. In addition, support services and care are required that include school monitoring, health monitoring including medication, and social, athletic and cultural opportunities. Most group homes find it necessary to solicit contributions and other support from the community in order to fulfill their program obligations.

The Grand Jury examined the budgets of Orange County group homes to see how resources are allocated. It is of interest to note the wide range the homes have for the basic categories of wages (which include salaries, benefits and taxes), food, rent and services/administration:

BUDGET RANGE

Wages	37 to 79% of total budget
Food	3 to 8% of total budget
Rent	0 to 15% of total budget
Services/Administration	14 to 52% of total budget

It is instructive to see how the above percentages translate to dollars per minor in a typical Rate Classification Level 12 home which receives \$4,423.00 per month for each minor:

MONTHLY BUDGET PER MINOR (RCL 12)

Food	\$150 to \$401
Wages	\$1855 to \$3960
Rent	\$0 to \$752
Services/Administration	\$701 to \$2607

(Rents are zero for some homes since they are owned outright.)

The budgets for the group homes are available to the SSA for review. With increased SSA staffing there is now an opportunity to review the group home budgets.

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

Approximately one-third of the 5,000 dependent minors in Orange County has learning disabilities that require special educational needs. Federal and State laws mandate that these needs be met by local or county school districts. A minor with these special needs must have an Individual Education Program. The process for implementing such a plan starts with signed permission from an authorized person (parent, legal guardian, or appointed surrogate) who signs for the minor to have an Individual Education Program. An Individual Education Program team, consisting of teachers, parents, psychologists, resource specialists or other interested individuals, draws up the plan. A number of group homes have on-site schools to implement Individual Education Programs for their children. The homes receive an additional \$4,000 per month per minor for this service.

There are a number of deficiencies with implementation of Individual Education Program for the group home minors. Frequently children come to a home without educational records even though there is a state requirement called the *Health and Education Passport* that mandates these records be available. Group home minors in need of an Individual Education Program program,

frequently have no one to initiate the process. In some cases the group homes have authorized a psycho-education assessment plan toward development of an Individual Education Program for a minor, which is prohibited by law and a conflict of interest. An annual review by the Individual Education Program team is required. In addition, the school provides quarterly progress reports and a three-year re-evaluation of needs and eligibility.

One teacher and an aide teach a small structured class of about 12 children, all having different needs where individualized instruction should be available. However, teachers are sometimes not adequately trained and are teaching with emergency credentials. Beyond this, there are many group home minors who are not technically learning disabled but who still need help that should be provided with tutors, monitors and reading programs.

EMANCIPATION AND TRANSITION PROGRAMS

One of the most important programs for the minors is the Independent Living Program administered under the direction of the SSA by the Orangewood Foundation and the CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) organization. This program for youths 16 to 18 years of age is designed to prepare them for the next phase of their lives—when they leave the home and will be independent. The program covers basic subjects such as setting up a household, budgeting, and getting and holding a job. The necessary job training and placement skills for this program are not as comprehensive as needed for when they are on their own. Programs that are available from other non-profit organizations, such as Orange County Works, could augment job training.

Until recently, when a group home resident reaches the age of 18 (or later if not yet graduated from high school), he left the home without any further county responsibility or help. This is an obvious deficiency in the system, as he does not have the maturity and resources to succeed alone. At this point he is most vulnerable and at risk to become homeless or resort to crime. Under SB 933, funds are provided to extend Independent Living Program services to youths after they leave foster care, and the county is starting to implement this requirement. The SSA is planning to expand this into a more comprehensive program.

There are a number of programs, government and private, starting to address this problem. One of the most successful programs, *Bridges to Independence*, is located in Los Angeles County and is administered by United Friends of the Children. This program provides residential facilities and support for a time until these youths can become independent.

FAMILY SUPPORT AND REUNIFICATION

An important goal for the SSA in dealing with foster minors is to reunite them with their parent(s) or a guardian if at all possible. This can sometimes be accomplished by providing “wraparound” services to the families that would enable them to cope and function effectively so that the child could remain with the family. A proposed county pilot program will use funds normally going to a group home to provide wraparound services to the family. These services designed for the individual child could provide public school help, an escort to and from school, respite care for the parent, family counseling and live-in counselors. A similar program has been in effect in Santa Clara County for the past five years with good results. The program allows the more damaged, Rate Classification Level 14, minors to live in a less restrictive home by providing the home with services and financial support.

FINDINGS

Under *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, responses are required to all findings. The 1998–99 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at 8 major findings.

1. Many group homes lack a good reading environment, a proper library with adequate books and other reading material, reading areas and proper bedside lighting. Many of the homes also do not have computers.

A response to Finding 1 is required from the **Social Services Agency**.

2. Staff stability is a recognized problem that has not been addressed. The average stay of a care staff member is about six months. High staff turnover undermines the minor's sense of security.

A response to Finding 2 is required from the **Social Services Agency**.

3. Case managers are not present daily at some group homes. Their presence is important in order to interface with the care staff and the minors.

A response to Finding 3 is required from the **Social Services Agency**.

4. Development of social skills in the minor's formative years is important, but there are few opportunities for socialization in or outside the group home.

A response to Finding 4 is required from the **Social Services Agency**.

5. With respect to the Individual Education Program:

Some minors who need to have an Individual Education Program are not being identified.

Communication between **Social Services Agency** and **Orange County Superintendent of Schools** in the planning, implementing and monitoring of an Individual Education Program is deficient.

Obtaining a legal surrogate parent to initiate the Individual Education Program process can be a problem.

A potential conflict of interest exists when a group home staff signs to be a surrogate parent for a minor who attends the group home-owned school.

A response to Finding 5 is required from the **Orange County Superintendent of Schools**.

6. The County's Independent Living Program that prepares the minors for emancipation when they leave the group home are deficient with respect to job acquisition training. Organizations that specialize in job training do not have access to offer their program.

A response to Finding 6 is required from the **Social Services Agency**.

7. Young people leaving group homes at age 18 are often not sufficiently capable and mature to be independent. Programs and facilities are needed to fulfil this transition.

A response to Finding 7 is required from the **Social Services Agency** and the **Board of Supervisors**.

8. Support services are needed in those cases where a child is transferred from a group home to his parent's or his guardian's home. The proposed wraparound program would provide comprehensive services but could take years to implement.

A response to Finding 8 is required from the **Social Services Agency**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, each recommendation must be responded to by the government entity to which it is addressed. These responses are submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court. Based on the findings, the 1998–99 Orange County Grand Jury recommends that:

1. **Social Services Agency** consider these factors for placement of a minor in a group home:

- (a) Adequate reading/study environment:

A library with age-appropriate reading materials and adequate lighting

Availability of a quiet study and reading area

Adequate bedside lighting

Staff and volunteers readers for young minors

Availability of computers

- (b) Group home staff turnover factors:

Adequacy of pay

Flexibility of hours (scheduling)

Responsibilities, education and training opportunities

Positive work environment

- (c) Performance of case managers with respect to:

Daily accessibility to minors

Quality of relationship with minor and staff

- (d) Opportunities for development of social skills for the minors

- (e) Proactive involvement in the minor's educational needs, such as tutors, mentors, reading programs, completion of education. (See Findings 1 through 4.)

A response to Recommendation 1 is required from the **Social Services Agency**.

2. The **Orange County Superintendent of Schools** assess and evaluate all group home minors for educational needs. **Orange County Superintendent of Schools** needs to be proactive in organizing the Individual Education Program teams for minors identified as learning disabled. (See Finding 5.)

A response to Recommendation 2 is required from the **Orange County Superintendent of Schools**.

3. The **Orange County Superintendent of Schools** seek a legal surrogate to initiate the Individual Education Program for minors who attend group home-owned schools. (See Finding 5.)

A response to Recommendation 3 is required from **Orange County Superintendent of Schools**.

4. The **Social Services Agency** and the **Orange County Superintendent of Schools** promote better interagency communication for the educational needs of the minor. (See Finding 5.)

A response to Recommendation 4 is required from **Social Services Agency** and **Orange County Superintendent of Schools**.

5. The **Social Services Agency** and the **Orange County Superintendent of Schools** eliminate the conflict of interest when group home staff becomes a surrogate parent for a minor in their group home school. (See Finding 5.)

A response to Recommendation 5 is required from **Social Services Agency** and **Orange County Superintendent of Schools**

6. The **Social Services Agency** strengthen the Independent Living Program for job preparation by including qualified organizations to run programs specifically for this purpose. (See Finding 6.)

A response to Recommendation 6 is required from **Social Services Agency**.

7. The **Board of Supervisors** and **Social Services Agency** embark on a program modeled after the successful and nationally recognized *Bridges to Independence* program in Los Angeles County. A similar program tailored for Orange County would pull together a collaboration of public and private organizations. The program would provide subsidized apartments and counseling for setting up a household, acquiring a job, and handling problems that occur at this critical juncture in their lives. (See Finding 7.)

A response to Recommendation 7 is required from the **Social Services Agency** and the **Board of Supervisors**.

8. The **Social Services Agency** improve the support services for minors who are transferred from a group home to their parent's or guardian's home a less restrictive home or are returned to a guardian. Evaluate the wraparound programs already implemented in other counties to determine their effectiveness and learn from the successful programs. (See Finding 8.)

A response to Recommendation 8 is required from the **Social Services Agency**.

COMMENDATION

The Grand Jury commends the many personnel of the Social Services Agency, the group homes and Court Appointed Special Advocates for their obvious dedication to a task that is a measure of a society's moral fabric.

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