

INVISIBLE FOSTER TEENS: WHERE ARE THEY?



SUMMARY

Sacramento County continues to fail – after many years – in its efforts to find safe permanent housing for foster teenagers who are housed in temporary facilities. These teenagers are virtually invisible because they are not a priority in Sacramento County’s foster system.

In recent years, the County has housed these youth in a neighborhood with easy access to vice and crime, in office buildings with no kitchens or showers, and in a jail-like former youth detention facility.

Under the auspices of the County’s Department of Child, Family and Adult Services (DCFAS), the Child Protective Services Division (CPS) bears the day-to-day responsibility to care for these teenagers but fails to meet its obligations. CPS abdicates its responsibility to these vulnerable unplaced foster teenagers who are entitled to a safe and secure living environment.

A County oversight committee, created to advise the Board of Supervisors (BOS), pays little or no attention to this festering problem. Ultimately, the BOS is responsible for these young people.

CPS’s long-term lack of planning results in them being reactive instead of proactive in addressing the changes required by the 2015 Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) legislation. This state legislation brought sweeping changes to the foster care system.

The County’s latest solution relies on three small “Welcome Homes” operated day-to-day by CPS that appear home-like and less institutional. However, these homes remain

unlicensed under state guidelines and continue to be an unsafe environment for foster teenagers and staff. To CPS's credit, the agency has recently opened a fourth home which is licensed and operated by an outside non-profit organization.

A move in the right direction, but these teenagers are still invisible.

BACKGROUND

When a child must be removed from their family home for reasons such as abuse, abandonment, or neglect, the child's protection and welfare become the responsibility of foster care, a system supervised by the State of California and administered by the counties. In 2015, Assembly Bill (AB) 403, better known as Continuum of Care Reform (CCR), was signed into law. The legislation was designed to severely reduce the use of group homes and move the children into more home-like settings.

In Sacramento County, CPS is responsible for the temporary care and permanent placement of children in foster care. Within CPS, the Centralized Placement Services Unit (CPSU) performs intake interviews of children and tries to find permanent placement with relatives or resource families (previously known as foster homes).

On average, there are approximately 1,200 foster children under the protection of CPS. Most of these children are successfully placed in appropriate home-based settings. However, on any given night, 40 to 50 unplaced foster children are either temporarily housed by CPS or missing and labeled "Absent Without Leave" (AWOL). Those who are not AWOL are sheltered in unlicensed spaces. AWOL teenagers, on the other hand, have simply walked away from a shelter or home placement.

Finding a suitable home for these teenagers has been a challenge. Teenagers are less likely to be placed with resource families for a variety of reasons. For example, some carry past traumatic experiences along with normal adolescent behaviors. Resource families more readily accept younger children. In turn, teenagers prefer the company of their age group, so those that go AWOL communicate with their friends and often turn to couch-surfing or life on the street. CPS is required to look for these youth, and cell phone calls or texts may be the only contact for weeks. The teenagers may then just drop into the Welcome Homes.

Two provisions of the state's Foster Youth Bill of Rights, first enacted in 2005, enable this freedom of movement. It states that children shall not "be locked in any portion of their foster care placement" and they are allowed contact with their friends.

In April 2023, the local news media first reported the County's practice of housing foster children in cells in a former juvenile detention facility, in violation of state law.

In response, the Grand Jury investigated and discovered a series of unlicensed housing arrangements for teenagers, consisting of (1) a CPSU office, (2) an office building, (3) a former detention center, and (4) converted residential properties labeled by CPS as

“Welcome Homes.” Starting in 2016, and continuing to date, these County-run facilities have been operationally unsuitable for temporary sheltering of unplaced foster teenagers.

The Sacramento County Children’s Coalition (Coalition) was established by the BOS in October 1994 to provide advisory oversight on matters relating to children and families in the County, which includes foster care. The Grand Jury noted the Coalition did not focus on foster care, allowing these unacceptable conditions to exist for too long under their watch.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury’s investigation consisted of the following:

- Reviewed broadcast and print media reports.
- Performed 12 interviews, including employees of County and state government, attorneys representing foster children, labor representatives of County social workers, members of the Child Protective System Oversight Committee (Oversight Committee), and leadership from non-profit agencies.
- Examined documents including redacted incident reports, an agreement between the Youth Law Center and the County of Sacramento, and internally reported statistics.
- Visited four Welcome Homes.
- Viewed October 17, 2023, public meeting of the BOS, which included the Annual Report of the Oversight Committee and CPS’s response.
- Studied publicly available websites which provided background into the County’s foster care system.
- Reviewed agendas and minutes of the Coalition and Oversight Committee meetings.
- Reviewed California State law governing foster youth. The most critical legislation is [Continuum of Care Reform](#) and the [Foster Care Bill of Rights](#)

GLOSSARY

AWOL	Absent Without Leave (missing)
BOS	Sacramento County Board of Supervisors
CCR	Continuum of Care Reform
CDSS	California Department of Social Services
CPS	Sacramento County Division of Child Protective Services

CPSU	Centralized Placement Services Unit within CPS
CRH	Children’s Receiving Home
DCFAS	Sacramento County Department of Child, Family and Adult Services
NREFM	Non-Related Extended Family Members
OB3	Sacramento County Office Building 3
STRTP	Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program
TSCF	Temporary Shelter Care Facility
WET Center	Warren E. Thornton Youth Center, a former Juvenile Detention Center
YLC	Youth Law Center

DISCUSSION

AB 403 was signed into law in 2015. Better known as Continuum of Care Reform (CCR), the goal is to provide care and services to foster children with permanent placement in a home-based setting, preferably with a relative or Non-related Extended Family Members (NREFM). Under CCR, two types of temporary homes are authorized to provide care for the foster children, who are mostly teenagers, when permanent placement in a home is not immediately available or appropriate. CPSU triages these unplaced foster teenagers for temporary placement.

1. Unplaced foster teens with significant physical, emotional, or behavioral health needs may be assigned to a Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program (STRTP). These facilities are designed to provide more intensive care and supervision of children than they would receive in traditional group homes. Examples of STRTPs being operated in Sacramento County are the Children’s Receiving Home (CRH) and the Sacramento Children’s Home, both non-profit organizations.
2. The other temporary shelter option is a Temporary Shelter Care Facility (TSCF), a home operated by the County or a private agency on the County’s behalf that provides for 24-hour non-medical care for up to 10 consecutive calendar days. During this time, CPSU staff work to find placement with Relatives/NREFM or resource families. Although the law does not provide for stays beyond 10 days, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) is aware circumstances may require stays of more than 10 days, accounted for as “overstays.”

TSCFs are rare in the State of California. Statewide, there exists only 11 TSCFs in eight different counties. When the Grand Jury’s investigation began, the Children’s Receiving Home was the only TSCF in Sacramento County, but it did not accept teenagers. Interviews revealed the demand for temporary placement has exceeded the supply since CCR was implemented.

CPS used two different office locations for temporary shelter from 2016 through 2022. These facilities provided no privacy, no shower or kitchen facilities, no rooms or standard beds, and could never be considered “home-like.” The offices were located in areas where sex trafficking was too easily accessible.

The County began looking for alternatives, and settled first on rehabilitating the Warren E. Thornton Youth Center (WET Center), a closed juvenile detention center. While this afforded some privacy along with showers and a gym, the beds were metal, rooms had wooden boxes placed over non-operational metal toilets, and the doors had glass windows. Meals had to be brought in because no kitchen facilities were available. Residents had to pass through metal detectors and security checks, and the Sacramento Sheriff’s Office staffed a Deputy there 24/7. The atmosphere was more like a jail than a home.

In February 2023, the County began a Request for Proposals process to seek non-governmental licensed providers to operate what it called Welcome and Assessment Centers (later called Welcome Homes), which were to meet the licensing requirements for TSCFs. Responses were due back to CPS by March 2023, and no successful responses were received.

AT A GLANCE: CPS ATTEMPTS HOUSING OF UNPLACED FOSTER TEENS				
LOCATION	CPSU Intake Office	County Office Building (OB3)	WET Youth Center	Welcome Homes*
TIME	2016 - 2020	2020-2022	2022 -2023	2023 and continuing
LICENSURE STATUS	Unlicensed	Unlicensed	Unlicensed	Unlicensed
DESCRIPTION OF CONDITIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence • No beds • No showers • No kitchen • Sex trafficking <p style="text-align: right;">- SF Chronicle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health and safety risk <li style="padding-left: 20px;">- CDSS • Unsafe conditions <li style="padding-left: 20px;">- Metro Fire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence • Drugs • Alcohol • Sex trafficking • Jail-like conditions <p style="text-align: right;">- Interviews</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence • Weapons • Drugs • Alcohol • Sex trafficking <p style="text-align: right;">- Interviews</p>

*Progress Ranch assumed operations of one of the Welcome Homes, with a TSCF license, in February 2024

In response to the media attention in April 2023 and a Youth Law Center (YLC) lawsuit final judgment requiring youth to be removed from the WET Center by June 16, 2023, the County changed its plan. They began to seek out three residential locations to serve as the Welcome Homes to house up to six teenagers each, with overflow cots available. The County filed applications with the state for TSCF licensure for each of the three properties. One year later, CPS still has not secured a license for any of the facilities, due to delays in obtaining complete background checks and health clearance for all staff.

Since 2016, unplaced foster teenagers have been temporarily housed in a series of inappropriate, unlicensed locations. Since the closure of group homes, as required by CCR, Sacramento County has proven incapable to secure a licensed County-run TSCF, let alone one that is safe and protected from violence, drug and alcohol use, and sex trafficking.

The unsafe and unstable living conditions apparent at all of the County-operated temporary shelters since 2016 make it abundantly clear CPS has been incapable of managing a TSCF within acceptable standards. This is not only the opinion of the Grand Jury, but opinions expressed in multiple interviews as well.

Operation of Welcome Homes

Welcome Homes opened with round-the-clock personnel who were inadequately trained and prepared. Based upon the Grand Jury's investigation, including interviews and BOS agenda items, staff positions with the relevant skills were not established at the time. CPS relies on social workers, probation aides, and supervisors to step in, resulting in costly overtime pay.

Labor leaders reported employees have been subjected to harsh conditions, unclear procedures, physical abuse, and critical incidents involving teenagers, for which they have not been adequately prepared or trained. Moreover, due to the lack of preparedness, direction, and leadership, foster teenagers have been exposed to problems such as drugs, alcohol, physical abuse, truancy, and sex trafficking.

Outside Operators

To CPS's credit, they successfully contracted with Progress Ranch to operate a fourth Welcome Home. Progress Ranch, a non-profit agency that specializes in foster care

services, secured licensure from the CDSS Division of Community Care Licensing in a matter of months, becoming fully operational in February 2024. CPS has been unable to accomplish this on any of the properties after nearly a year of trying.

Based on Grand Jury interviews, the collaboration with Progress Ranch has been positive. It seems a promising model for success in an arena historically plagued with frustration and failure.

CPS has also entered into an arrangement with CRH to remodel two bungalows on its campus, with the intent of using these as TSCFs. In interviews, CPS staff stated the smaller occupancy of the bungalows (4-6 each) and physical separation from younger children will provide a positive environment for teens.

CPS's strategy to recruit more professional agencies to operate the remaining Welcome Homes is encouraging. However, securing contracts with agencies takes time. Meanwhile, CPS must continue to provide care for these teenagers and should do so in a safe and healthful manner.

The Grand Jury recognizes that while CPS awaits licensure of the current Welcome Homes by CDSS, CPS should operate these homes in the same way they would if fully licensed.

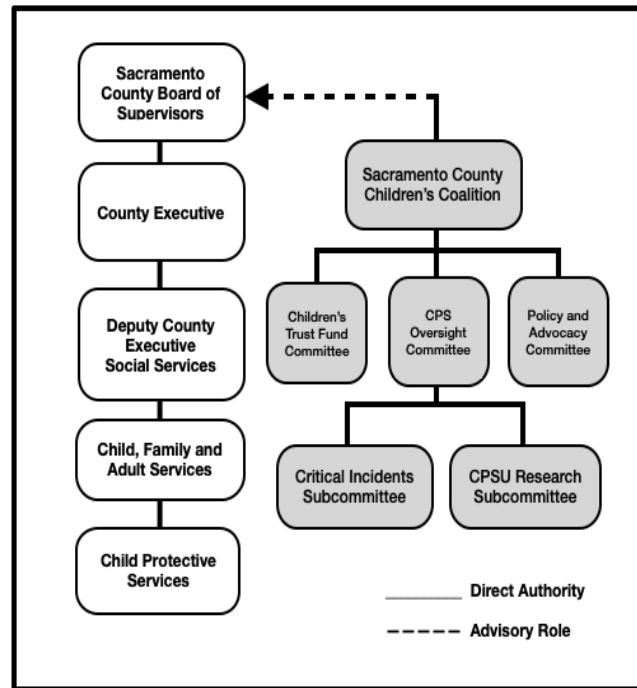
CPS currently expends resources and energy in operating the Welcome Homes. Staff should focus more on applying the County’s Family Finding policy to provide permanent placement for teenagers with relatives and NREFM. The University of San Diego Law School Children’s Advocacy Institute reported in December 2023 that Sacramento County currently falls behind most major California counties in placing foster children with relatives/NREFM.

Oversight

The Sacramento County Children's Coalition (Coalition) is an advisory body appointed by the BOS on matters relating to the needs of children, youth, and families. The Coalition created the Child Protective Systems Oversight Committee (Oversight Committee) to examine and evaluate the efforts of all service providers that are part of child protective systems. The Coalition’s Policy and Advocacy Committee recommends data-driven actions to improve social outcomes for the County’s children.

The Grand Jury learned the issue of unplaced foster teenagers has been virtually invisible to the Oversight Committee. As early as 2017, the Oversight Committee was warned by CPS officials and the Coalition’s Policy and Advocacy Committee that the loss of group homes would require alternatives for temporary shelter for foster teenagers. No investigation on how to provide new options was undertaken, so no recommendations were forthcoming from the Oversight Committee.

When the WET Center activity appeared in the news and gained the attention of County leadership, the Oversight Committee then acted by creating the CPSU Research subcommittee to look into the matter. The two members of this subcommittee subsequently resigned from the Oversight Committee before making any report. With no specific individuals assigned to the investigation, it has devolved into a series of questions and answers between the Oversight Committee Chair and CPS management. The Oversight Committee’s plans include making recommendations in their Annual



Reference Chart

Report to the BOS, relying solely on information from the very organization they are investigating.

A deeper dive into the actions of the Oversight Committee revealed almost all of their attention was and has been focused on child abuse. The Oversight Committee's Critical Incidents subcommittee is mandated to review all Critical Incident Reports of maltreatment due to abuse or neglect. The Grand Jury recognizes that injury or death of children in Sacramento County warrants this level of attention, but so do foster children.

For years, the Oversight Committee of volunteer experts, community activists, medical and educational professionals, clergy, law enforcement, and helpful citizens appears to be unable to form a quorum at their meetings. They have been plagued with vacancies, no shows, and tired leadership. This reduces the effectiveness of their oversight.

Conclusion

This Grand Jury investigation and report focused solely on foster teenagers that are awaiting placement in a home. For them, the foster system in Sacramento County is woefully broken. DCFAS fails to lead and CPS fails to serve. The BOS and their advisory group, the Coalition's Oversight Committee, do not recognize these failures.

The appalling conditions under which these teenagers have suffered have been widely publicized by media for years. Still the conditions continue. Now that these teenagers are no longer invisible, the County must act.

FINDINGS

- F1 CPS has failed to establish a licensed County-operated TSCF, leaving unplaced foster teens without a safe, healthy, and comfortable home, as is required by the Foster Youth Bill of Rights. (R1)
- F2 CPS lacks practical experience, human resources, and commitment to operate TSCFs, and as a result have been unable to operate them successfully. (R2, R3)
- F3 CPS has failed to eliminate exposure to drug and alcohol use, possession of weapons, sex trafficking, and other threats around the County-operated Welcome Homes, leaving teenagers vulnerable and unsafe. (R4, R5)
- F4 CPS does not focus adequate effort on Family Finding, and as a result, falls behind most counties in placing foster children with relatives/NREFM. (R5, R6)
- F5 The Coalition does not require foster care conditions to be included in the Oversight Committee's Annual Report to the BOS, potentially leaving the BOS uninformed. (R7)
- F6 The Oversight Committee's failure to recognize and respond to CPS's inadequate efforts to shelter unplaced foster teens allowed the many years of unsafe, unhealthy, and unlicensed living conditions to continue. (R8)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1 CPS should present a viable strategic plan to the BOS, no later than November 30, 2024, to recruit licensed and experienced agencies to operate the Welcome Homes as TSCFs, replacing the county-operated model. (F1)
- R2 CPS should continue to collaborate with outside operators, such as Progress Ranch and the Children's Receiving Home of Sacramento, to establish one or more licensed TSCFs operated on behalf of the County as soon as possible but no later than December 31, 2024. (F2)
- R3 So long as CPS continues to operate the Welcome Homes, they should be staffed with personnel with practical experience in congregate living environments as soon as possible but no later than December 31, 2024. (F2)
- R4 While the Welcome Homes are still in use, CPS should immediately implement stronger measures to eliminate drug and alcohol use, possession of weapons, sex trafficking, and other threats, but no later than September 30, 2024. (F3)
- R5 CPS reports should publicize statistics that state the number and type of incidents related to temporarily-sheltered foster children, the average daily census of all temporary shelters, and the number of AWOL foster children, and report these measures to the BOS in a public meeting on a quarterly basis starting no later than October 31, 2024. (F3, F4)
- R6 BOS should require that CPS rigorously follow the policy on Family Finding to increase the number of teenagers placed with relatives/NREFM no later than December 31, 2024. (F4)
- R7 The Coalition should amend Section 1.04 of its Bylaws to require a review of Foster Care equal in standing to Critical Incidents and to report annually to the BOS, no later than December 31, 2024. (F5)
- R8 The Oversight Committee should establish a monthly review of Foster Care, and include a report on CPS's progress in opening TSCFs, no later than December 31, 2024. (F6)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses as follows. From the following governing body of a public agency within 90 days, for all Findings and Recommendations:

Sacramento County Board of Supervisors
700 H Street, Suite 2450
Sacramento, CA 95814

Mail or deliver a hard copy response to:

The Honorable Bunmi Awoniyi
Presiding Judge
Sacramento County Superior Court
720 9th Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Please email a copy of the response to:

Ms. Erendira Tapia-Bouthillier
Sacramento County Superior Court
Grand Jury Coordinator
Email: TapiaE@saccourt.ca.gov

INVITED RESPONSES

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(Findings 1-4, Recommendations 1-6)

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(Findings 5-6, Recommendations 7-8)

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(Findings 1-4, Recommendations 1-6)

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