STATE OF CALIFORNIA—HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
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ALL COUNTY INFORMATION NOTICE NO. I-31-12

TO: ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS
         ALL CHIEF PROBATION OFFICERS
         ALL TITLE IV-E TRIBES

SUBJECT: Best Practices for Placement Stability

The purpose of this All County Information Notice (ACIN) is to disseminate best practices identified in County Self-Assessments (CSAs) and System Improvement Plans (SIPs) in response to the state's continued efforts to bring about improvement in placement stability.

On October 4, 2011, the Children's Bureau (CB) confirmed that California had successfully completed all of the required Children and Family Services Review (CFSR) Program Improvement Plan (PIP) action steps. In addition, the CB confirmed that all of the target improvement goals were met with the exception of Composite 4-Stability in Foster Care (also referred to as Placement Stability).

The state continues to demonstrate achievement towards meeting the Placement Stability target with the understanding that each placement change that a child experiences requires the child to acclimate to a new environment at home, in school, and in relationships. Children deal with change various ways, including aggravation of problematic and unhealthy behaviors. In some cases, academic development is interrupted, social relationships are severed, and new barriers to reunification may possibly arise. These troublesome behaviors are associated with placement instability, and contribute to a reduced chance of reunification.

In its latest quarterly report to the CB, the state outlined the actions that it is implementing to reach the target goal of the measure. California implemented a multi-faceted strategy that includes the following:

Step 1. Closely examining performance on the existing federal measures and composite across the 12 largest counties as their caseloads account for over 80 percent of the total child welfare population in the state.

   a.   Examining county performance through case and demographic variables.

      b. Examining county performance over time and identifying counties that have been stable, improving, or notably declining.

Step 2. Based on results of the county analysis, assemble practices that counties have identified in their CSAs and SIPs as having contributed to their improvement over a short period of time.

Within the twelve largest counties, the state focused its analyses on the six counties that demonstrated the most percent change difference over three years in placement stability. After completing the analyses of these counties, the state identified the following practices for improving placement stability:

Core Strategies

✓ By far the two most effective and common methods identified by counties as good practices for improvement in placement stability are Family to Family Interventions and Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings. These two interventions ensure that community and family support systems are in place at the onset of a child welfare case. They also ensure that safety plans are in place for the family. When TDMs are completed at placement change they ensure that the placement of children is in the least restrictive and most appropriate setting, they reduce unnecessary placement moves for children, and assist families with needed support to successfully reunify.

✓ Implementation of early family finding practices to locate appropriate and capable family members at case initiation. Research finds that children placed with kin experience fewer moves.

✓ Improved recruitment and support of resource families. Some studies suggest that without adequate preparation, training, and support for foster parents, children will experience disruptions in their placement. Foster parents who have a variety of social supports, such as from extended family members, their child welfare agency and through parent partnering are more likely to provide a stable placement for the child.

✓ Increased and improved use of Wraparound services. Wraparound is a team-based planning procedure that offers individualized and organized family-driven care. Wraparound is intended to meet the multifaceted needs of children who are involved with a number of child and family-assisting systems (mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, special education, etc.). These children are also often at risk of placement in institutional settings, and may experience emotional, behavioral, and/or mental health problems. Wraparound necessitates that families, providers, and significant members of the family's social support

network work in partnership to construct a practical plan that responds to the precise needs of the child and family. One study comparing Wraparound to standard practice foster care indicated that children in Wraparound had significantly fewer placement changes.

Training and Supports

✓ Inform caregivers of permanency options and impact on services and payments leading to increased knowledge and better decision making. Provision of refresher training to staff on financial aspects and services available to caregivers and children through guardianship, KinGAP, and the Adoption Assistance Program (AAP).

Worker and Agency Characteristics

✓ Evidence suggests a link between worker stability and decreased risk for placement disruption. One study cited "system or policy" related issues accounted for 70% of the reasons for children being moved and that the fewer workers that a child has is related to an increased probability that the child will be reunified with their parents. In part this relationship between caseworker turnover and placement disruption is attributed to both foster children and the foster parents receiving less contact and support.

Coordination and Community

✓ Increased and improved coordination of services with other agencies. Some counties who improved in placement stability attributed their improvement, in part, to increased and more efficient access of services from other agencies. Caseworkers and families receive coordinated services from CalWORKs, workforce development agencies, Family Resource Centers, and child care services to provide caregivers with services and support to care for their children; these supports in turn increase the likelihood of reunification for birth parents, thereby reducing time in care and opportunity for placement disruptions. As well, foster families have access to services and supports they need to provide appropriate care for children and access to resources that may aptly prepare them for placement.

✓ Use of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). CASA volunteers work to make certain that a child's right to a safe, permanent home is acted upon by the court in a sensitive and appropriate manner. CASA volunteers deal with only one or two children at a time allowing them time to research each case thoroughly. The information they gather helps the judge form a more complete picture of a child's life and helps CASA volunteers make a fully informed recommendation for

a child's placement. They aid permanency planning efforts and assist children in finding safe and nurturing homes.

✓ Partnerships with local school districts to provide Multi-Systemic Therapy, an evidenced-based intervention for foster care and probation children. Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) is an intensive family and community-based treatment program that concentrates on the complete life of chronic and violent juvenile offenders (their homes and families, schools and teachers, neighborhoods and friends, etc.). MST has been proven to work and produce positive results with the toughest kids. MST blends some of the best clinical treatments (cognitive behavioral therapy, behavior management training, family therapies and community psychology) to reach and make positive change in this population. Evidence indicates that MST has been highly effective in keeping kids in their home, and reducing out-of-home placements.

Innovative Processes and Program Pilots

✓ The implementation of Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained (KEEP) project, a parent training intervention program. The objective of KEEP is to give parents effective tools for dealing with their child's externalizing and other behavioral and emotional problems and to support them in the implementation of those tools. Findings indicate that the KEEP intervention continues to be effective at reducing child behavior problems over the course of the intervention. Foster parents found the format of the intervention to be conducive to learning new parenting strategies and forming positive and supportive relationships with other foster parents.

✓ Placement Stabilization Clinicians placed throughout the regions to provide additional support service to foster, kinship and Non-Relative Extended Family Members (NREFM) caregivers. These clinicians provide short-term mental health crisis intervention to caregivers and children when a caregiver has notified the social worker of a need.

✓ Implementation of after-hours response through a Relative Assessment Unit (RAU). Responding social workers specialize in relative and non-related extended family member (NREFM) home assessments. This has also assisted in ensuring that children are rapidly placed in relative/NREFM homes.

Way Station support groups made up of foster parents, placement units in specific regions and community partners developed quarterly respite nights. Way Station support groups not only offer assistance and encouragement to foster parents, they also assist with brief care for foster children in placement and in placement transition.

✓ Elimination of emergency shelters, receiving homes and the use of foster homes as emergency placements has helped to reduce unnecessary placement changes. Education and training for placement staff has been put in place to successfully support these practices.

Placement Selection

✓ Centralization of placement process by utilizing a central placement unit that serves to identify the best and least restrictive placement options to improve stability of out-of-home placements.
   o Development and maintenance of a placement matching database
   o Development and implementation of procedures for matching, tracking and monitoring placements; and tracking placement disruptions.

✓ Improved identification of a child's needs and the ability of the foster family to meet those needs. Taking into consideration the foster children's emotional and developmental needs and the ability of the caregiver to meet those needs will reduce the likelihood of placement change and increase placement stability.

California remains steadfast in its commitment to ensuring that children have permanency and stability in their living situations. The CDSS continues to collaborate closely with its county partners in evaluating the action steps that should be taken in order to continue improving performance in this area, and in measuring the effects the action steps have had on children in care.

Questions pertaining to Placement Stability should be directed to the CFSR Unit at (916) 651-8099 or via email to: chldserv@dss.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Original Document Signed By:

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