

Continuum of Care Evaluation Proposal

Background and Objective

The Santa Clara County Continuum of Care relies on a number of providers, county agencies, and dedicated staff to effectively support youth in the foster care system. The current evaluation aims to ensure services across the Continuum of Care are working together and supporting youth as intended. The evaluation approach includes analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of a youth's experience.

Evaluation Plan

The evaluation currently consists of quarterly reports providing descriptive data on the following metrics:

- Number of children entering care
- Demographic information (sex, age, race/ethnicity)
- Average number of placements within one month of entering care
- Percentage placed with relatives/non-relative extended family members (NREFMs) or Guardians
- Welcoming Center outputs (number of children, average length of stay and overstay)
- Percentage of children who were still in care after one month

These descriptive data formed an integral part of the initial evaluation, providing an overview of short-term outputs. However, assessing the impact of the various components of the Continuum of Care requires more intensive approaches, utilizing a variety of methods.

Moving forward, the following are proposed. These approaches focus on incorporating resource parent, youth and staff voice into program implementation:

- Quarterly Technology Services and Solutions (TSS) dashboards reporting on metrics similar to those captured in the quarterly reports
- Human-centered design (HCD) approach to understanding youth experience and co-creating youth-centered recommendations regarding the Welcoming Center
- HCD approach to understanding resource parent and Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) staff experiences and co-creating solutions around information sharing about children placed with resource families
- Annual report assessing longitudinal outcomes, such as relative/NREFM placement and foster care exit, and how these outcomes relate to both demographic variables (e.g. child/youth's age, race/ethnicity) and child welfare variables (e.g. receipt of specialized services)

Outcome Evaluation

The main goal of the Continuum of Care is to reduce the duration of child involvement with the child welfare system. By offering a wide array of therapeutic services, the Continuum of Care aims to:

- Increase home-based family care
- Decrease congregate-care placement; and
- Expedite paths to permanency.

Objective

The overarching goal of the study is to explore whether the Continuum of Care achieved its outcomes of increasing home-based family care, decreasing congregate-care placement and expediting paths to permanency. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore associations among demographic variables (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, location, pre-intervention characteristics such as abuse history and parental factors) and child welfare variables (e.g. receipt of specialized services, such as Immediate Stabilization Services and Wraparound, and case severity) in relation to anticipated Continuum of Care outcomes (e.g. placement stability, relative/NREFM placements and foster care exit).

Sample

This study will focus on children who entered foster care for eight days or longer in calendar years 2012, 2017 and 2022. Data will be analyzed 12 months out from the child's initial entry into foster care. The sample will exclude children discharged to adoption who reentered foster care within 12 months, initial placement episodes that were open for less than eight days, and children who entered or exited foster care at age 18.

Methods

Statistical approaches will include descriptive information such as counts and percentages, bivariate analyses investigating significant differences between group proportions, and regression models exploring associations between the outcome measure and demographic and child welfare variables. Subgroup analyses may be conducted among children exiting within three months or less, and those staying for longer periods. Results will be compared between three different cohorts to assess if and how associations differ based on the services provided.

Strengths

Longitudinal Perspective and Comparative Analysis: Analyzing data from different entry years (2012, 2017, 2022) allows for a longitudinal perspective examining how associations have evolved over time. By studying multiple cohorts, the study will compare the associations among demographic and child welfare variables and anticipated outcomes across these cohorts. This approach can help identify temporal patterns and differences.

Limitations

Data Consistency: Differences in data collection methods, definitions, or reporting practices may introduce bias into the analysis.

Selection Bias: Children who enter the child welfare system in different years may differ in terms of characteristics or experiences, leading to potential selection bias.

Temporal Confounding: Changes in outcomes over time could be influenced by factors other than the variables included in this study. These factors may include shifts in the child welfare system, economic conditions, or policy changes.

Limited Causality: While the study will identify associations among variables, the observational nature will not allow for establishing causality and assessing whether certain demographic or child welfare variables directly cause specific outcomes.

Generalizability: The findings from this study will be specific to the given contexts and time periods. Generalizing results is not possible within the context of this study.

Youth Human-Centered Design

A key component of the Continuum of Care is the Welcoming Center (TWC), a therapeutic, home-like setting that supports young people (0-17) as they navigate the trauma of removal or placement disruption. When youth arrive at TWC they are met by well-trained staff who aim to provide a calm, stable environment while their individualized needs are assessed.

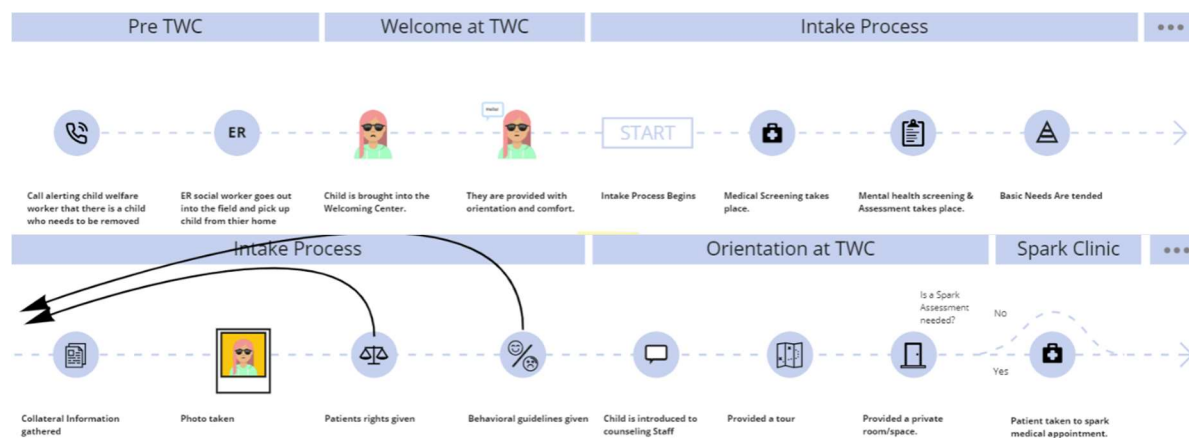
Objective

In the initial stages of the evaluation, an HCD approach was used to understand the processes occurring at TWC, from intake to exit. Several stakeholders and service providers, from DFCS, Seneca and Pacific Clinics were invited to participate in the exercise. The final output was a journey map of TWC processes. While the journey map provides a thorough outline of the process from the perspective of adult staff, it offers a limited view of the youth perspective. The objective of this component of the evaluation is to use an HCD approach for youth to share their experiences and provide recommendations on how TWC's processes can be tailored to meet their unique needs.

Methods

HCD is an iterative design approach focused on creating experiences tailored to the needs of the user. Journey mapping is the primary HCD method that will be used in this project. This approach involves creating a visual representation of youth journeys and will help in better understanding and empathizing with their experiences. The output of this exercise will be a timeline or flowchart outlining each step youth take when interacting with TWC staff. The journey map will include touchpoints, emotions, and key actions at each stage, allowing for a holistic understanding of youth experiences. An example of a condensed journey map is provided below (Figure 1). Once youth have identified pain points and opportunities, they will brainstorm potential solutions reflective of their needs and preferences.

Figure 1. Condensed TWC Journey Map from Staff Perspective



Dissemination of Findings

Two separate post-sessions will be conducted with both youth and Welcoming Center staff to disseminate findings and discuss potential next steps in continuing to improve youth experience at TWC. In addition, a written report will be provided to the Board of Supervisors.

Resource Parent/DFCS Social Worker Human Centered Design

In September 2022, the Social Services Agency Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) in partnership with Resource Development Associates (RDA), submitted an Evaluation Report to the Board of Supervisors on the DFCS Continuum of Care effort. In addition to quantitative data, the report included qualitative findings from RDA led focus groups and interview with over 85 stakeholders that included resource and professional parents.

The qualitative analysis found reoccurring themes regarding communication between resource parents and DFCS social workers. Resource parents expressed a need for more information about their potential placement (including the youth's background and behaviors) and not being prepared to meet the needs of children/youth due to a lack of communication regarding child/youth background and/or behavioral issues. Similarly, DFCS program managers and service providers stated that they believe caregivers may commit to receiving youth without fully understanding what will be required of them. In the Continuum of Care Evaluation Report, the authors recommended that future research delve deeper into the potential communication challenges between resource parents and DFCS social workers.

Objective

The objective of this component of the evaluation is to use an HCD approach for resource parents and DFCS social workers to share their experiences and co-create solutions for a mechanism to share a child's information in a manner that both meets the needs of resource parents while functioning within the context of DFCS.

Methods

The HCD method described above will be utilized. Creation of a visual representation of resource parent and social worker journeys and will help in better understanding and empathizing with their experiences. The output of this exercise will be a timeline or flowchart outlining the experience of resource parents and social workers when a child is placed with a resource family. The journey map will include touchpoints, pain points, emotions, and key actions at each stage, allowing for a holistic understanding of resource parent and social worker experiences. An example of a condensed journey map is provided above (Fig 1). Once resource parents and social workers have identified pain points and opportunities, they will brainstorm potential solutions reflective of their needs and preferences.

Dissemination of Findings

Two separate post-sessions will be conducted with both resource parents and DFCS staff to disseminate findings and discuss potential next steps in continuing to improve information sharing for resource parents. In addition, a written report will be provided to the Board of Supervisors.