

Roanoke Times (Virginia)

October 11, 2004

Safe at Home in Alabama – The Southern State’s Child Welfare System is Called a National Model

By Mike Hudson (mike.hudson@roanoke.com and 540/981-3332)

<http://www.roanoke.com/news/roanoke%5C11988.html>

Paul Vincent was the man in charge, but he had to admit: Alabama’s child welfare system was a mess. It was, he recalled, “a very bad system.”

In the early 1990s, things were in such disarray that the state had a backlog of 2,000 uninvestigated child abuse and neglect complaints, including 1,000 in Birmingham’s Jefferson County alone.

Caseloads were huge – 40 or 50 children per caseworker – and lots of kids were warehoused in institutional settings or shuttled from foster home to foster home.

“Basically, people were in a crisis mode or a reactive mode,” said Ivor Groves, who became involved in the system in 1993 as a court-appointed monitor with the job of overseeing its overhaul. “Where people spent their time was whatever was the crisis at that time. So many cases weren’t getting anything.”

Practically the only way to get services to children was to remove them from their homes.

“If you were in doubt about safety or had any question about what needed to be done, you brought the kid into care,” Groves said.

Children were jerked out of homes without regard to what was best for them or whether their families’ hurts could be healed with preventive services.

It took a lawsuit in the name of an 8-year-old child – known only as R.C. in court papers – to change the system. R.C. suffered from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder but was locked in a psychiatric ward and heavily medicated because the state had no other place for him.

The settlement forced Alabama to reform its programs for dealing with impoverished families and abused and neglected children – and produced what has been called one of the best child welfare systems in America.

Welfare executives across the nation speak of “family preservation,” a phrase that expresses the ideal that government should work with parents to help fix family problems rather than take children away and put them into an overburdened foster care system. But some child welfare systems – like Alabama’s – are more aggressive than others in trying to keep families together.

Richard Wexler, director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, a Virginia-based group that pushes family preservation, says fixing ailing child welfare systems requires a paradigm shift, a new way of approaching old problems. Move the system, he says, not the child. Deal with basic survival needs first, then help parents work on their problems with counseling and education. Make the services intensive and make social workers available on a 24-hour basis.

Family preservation workers see families in different settings for long periods of time. Because of that, Wexler argues, and because they’re usually better trained than traditional child protection workers, they’re more likely to know when a family can – and can’t – be preserved.

Vincent, the Alabama system’s director at the time of the R.C. litigation, says he welcomed the legal challenge. He knew things needed to change. At first, he thought the solution would simply be “more of the same” – more funding to hire more people to keep doing things the way things had always been done.

But he says the settlement forced him and other social workers to rethink how they dealt with families in crisis. The result was “a complete redesign of the system.” Families became part of the solution, he says, rather than feeling they were having the authority of the state “inflicted on them.”

One early example of the change in philosophy, Vincent recalls, involved a girl who was so dangerously obese her doctor urged social workers to remove her from her grandmother’s home because the grandmother wasn’t able to control the girl’s eating habits. The girl felt shame. Other children teased her. She didn’t want to go to school. Instead of removing her from home, social workers arranged a contract with a Weight Watchers instructor, who helped the girl eat better, exercise and feel better about herself. She lost lots of weight and was able to stay with her grandmother.

Now, more than a decade into the changes, Groves says, Alabama’s children are safer. Foster care placements rank below the national average, despite a methamphetamine abuse epidemic that’s strained the system’s resources. Children who do go into foster care are less likely to bounce from place to place.

Alabama has increased its child welfare payroll from about 900 caseworkers to about 1,500. It has nearly tripled its spending on child welfare, mostly by working to pull down federal dollars. Caseloads for workers who handle foster care and in-home supervision cases hover around 18 children per worker. Caseloads for abuse and neglect investigators run about 12 children per worker, Groves says.

Social workers have more time to call and visit clients. And they're armed with "flex funds" they can use to deal with family crises and needs, such as tutoring for children or quick cash to fix a broken-down car that's undermining a parent's job stability. The idea is to reduce poverty's day-to-day and long-term pressures and thus reduce violence, substance abuse and other family woes.

The key to Alabama's success, Groves says, has been leadership, accountability and a commitment to working with families rather than against them.

That's important, he says, because there's always "a tension between telling parents, 'Here are your problems. You fix them,' or 'Let's sit down and figure out how we can make things better.' It's so tempting to slide into telling them what they're going to do and then, say, 'If they don't, by god, we're going to take their children away.'"

Alabama's experience is similar to that of other systems that have committed to re-creating themselves in a different image.

In southwestern Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, the top welfare official decided to reverse what he saw as social workers' "us versus them" attitude toward parents. Marc Cherna worked to relieve the county's swollen foster care rolls by keeping more children with their parents and by providing a safety net that includes family-support centers and after-school programs at public housing projects. The number of children in foster homes or residential programs dropped from 3,300 to 2,300.

"Removing a child from their biological home is always a traumatic experience for the child, with pretty rare exceptions," Cherna said. "So even though it may not be the best situation, you do tremendous emotional damage to children by taking them away from their parents. In foster care, they may get good care and they may not."

Besides, he says, studies show that children in foster care return to their families after they turn 18, going "right back to the biological parents you've been spending so much money to keep them away from."

If children can't stay with their parents, social workers try hard to place them with other relatives, then support the new caregivers by paying them the same monthly stipend that foster parents receive.

The system, which serves an area with a population of 1.3 million, is "far from perfect," Cherna said. But "we're very strong on safety. I don't think we leave kids at risk. We minimize risk by providing services."

In El Paso County, Colo., authorities emphasize preventing crises rather than responding to them, producing what's been called "one of the most compassionate and effective child welfare systems in the country."

The system works to get parents job training, child care and other help. The result: fewer children in foster care, along with praise from the Harvard School of Government and other organizations.

One story, related in the Arizona Republic newspaper, sums up the Colorado county's prevention philosophy – and its effectiveness in preserving families and saving taxpayer money: A great-aunt who'd taken in seven nieces and nephews was facing eviction. Her car was about to be repossessed. She thought she'd have to give up the children. Welfare officials calculated it would cost \$168,000 to keep all seven in foster care for a year. Better, they decided, to get her \$5,000 to resolve her financial crisis.

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