

Residentially Based Services (RBS) Reform Project Feedback Report for Los Angeles Demonstration Site Review Conducted November 7, 2011

Background:

An on-site review of the Los Angeles RBS Demonstration Project was conducted on November 7, 2011, by representatives of the California Department of Social Services and various San Bernardino RBS Demonstration Project county and provider agencies, and Hay Consulting. (See Attachment A for a list of individual Site Review Team members.) By the time of the review, the Los Angeles Demonstration Site had been in operation for eleven months. It had enrolled a total of 81 youth placed by the county child welfare agency with one of three RBS providers.

The purposes of the review were to assess fidelity to the county's approved RBS Memorandum of Understanding and the county's continued conformance to RBS tenets as their program evolves; to monitor RBS implementation and identify implementation glitches for resolution; to identify local technical assistance needs; and to begin assessing quality of services delivered. An additional benefit of conducting the review was to engage San Bernardino as a "peer" Demonstration Site in the review process in order to promote the identification and dissemination of best practices among the four RBS Demonstration Sites.

Prior to the on-site portion of the review, the Demonstration Site was asked to provide a report of the "RBS Days of Care" for each youth admitted to the RBS project since it began. This was designed to illustrate how youth have moved through the residential group care component to lower level foster care placement and, eventually, to permanency. It was also designed to capture any use of crisis stabilization.

The actual on-site review consisted of group and individual interviews, as well as the review of randomly selected provider comprehensive plans of care for enrolled youth. Group interviews were conducted separately with county staff and with provider staff. Individual interviews were conducted with nine client youth and members of three families, pursuant to the RBS site review protocol that a minimum of three youth and one family member are to be interviewed from each provider. All interviews were conducted using standardized interview questions. Comprehensive plans of care were reviewed for 17 youth. The review team also toured one provider facility.

Observations and Recommendations:

The following discussion is intended to capture at a high level (1) what is working well in the local Demonstration Site; (2) what challenges have been encountered by the site and how the Demonstration Site has chosen to address those challenges; and (3) additional changes the Site Review Team recommends the Demonstration Site consider incorporating.

Strengths:

The Los Angeles Demonstration Site enjoys a collaborative partnership among participating county and provider agencies. Successful strategies have been employed in the areas of family engagement, permanency strategies, care coordination, therapeutic interventions, and training and support. Examples of these strategies include:

- Conducting targeted orientation activities for youth and families which incorporate “strength chats”, one-on-one outreach, and a family-friendly pamphlet to help prepare families for participation in the more collaborative, family-centered RBS program.
- Providing family support groups, on-campus activities and supportive outreach to families in their own communities to build trust and commitment.
- Employing skilled Parent Partners and other staff who operates from a non-judgmental, strength-based perspective and who consult with parents/relatives to build collaborative relationships to support the child.
- Linking families to informal, natural supports in their own communities to help families recognize who their natural support network is and practice how to keep these people connected and engaged.
- Revising visitation policies and making structural changes to the residential facilities to support family visits which build stronger bonds between youth and families in preparation for the transition to home.
- Linking youth to activities in the community that are geared toward the youth’s interests.
- Utilizing supportive and progressive home-visitation to help youth and family develop stronger bonds to reinforce permanency. RBS staff maintains close contact with the family to help the youth and family practice and reinforce positive behaviors and to determine when and what additional support the family needs.
- Ensuring family and youth attendance at Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings by providing concrete, individualized support to families, such as transportation, scheduling events in the community and when convenient for families to attend, and engaging family members one-on-one prior to and following meetings.
- Utilizing the Interagency Screening Committee (ISC) to provide oversight of the care plans developed by the CFTs by ensuring all domains are addressed in the plan, that the plan was developed with active involvement of the youth and family, and that the family’s signatures are included on the written document. ISC is also helpful in reducing the system barriers the providers encounter when working with youth and families across multiple agencies.
- Utilizing crisis stabilization to help prevent family disruption and stabilize youth.
- Developing a safety plan for crisis management for each case to guide the actions that will be taken in the event of a crisis, identify the triggers for initiating action, designate the best people to act as crisis responders based on individual relationships, and provide families opportunities to practice what to do if a crisis occurs.
- Utilizing the mobilization team to conduct pre-planning with the community and family. The mobilization team also engages the school to orient them to the

safety plan for crisis management, making them aware of the triggers and the planned response to crisis behaviors.

- Utilizing evidence-based practices that each provider determines is the best fit for the child's needs. These practices include aggressive replacement therapy, trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy, functional family therapy.
- Providing effective trainings such as RBS foundational training, youth specialist training and facilitator training.
- Positively impacting the way the non-RBS units of the residential group home serve youth by informally transferring new skills and attitudes from the RBS residential staff to the non-RBS residential staff.

Challenges Identified and Adaptations Made by the Los Angeles Demonstration Site:

Several challenges have been identified by the Demonstration Site during the operation of their RBS program. The most critical challenges are discussed below.

- County Social Workers have presented challenges due to varying degrees of understanding and commitment to the RBS principles. Making the shift from exercising independent, professional, case decision-making to functioning as a member of a team of decision-makers that includes the family and youth as equal partners has been problematic for some Social Workers. The single most critical challenge this has created has been their inconsistent participation in CFT meetings which are essential to support permanency planning and case progress under the RBS program. Inconsistent participation in the CFT meetings also has contributed to miscommunication about the permanency plan for the youth. In addition, lack of Social Worker commitment has resulted in lukewarm endorsement of family engagement, as well as delays in allowing providers access to case files to identify potential family connections. Unavailability to engage in timely transition planning for youth and an unwillingness by some Social Workers to transition youth to the community for fear of destabilization have both resulted in residential group home stays beyond the nine month target.
- Ensuring county line staff is fully trained in RBS principles and practices has been difficult. Not only has it been a challenge getting experienced Social Workers to attend the RBS foundational training, but also staff turnover at the county has exacerbated the problem.
- Unresolved family conflict has presented challenges in creating a connection between the youth and his/her family. Families need to be taught the skills and communication strategies to resolve these conflicts and work together for the best interests of the child.
- At least one provider failed to offer family-focused therapeutic services to all its RBS clients.
- Since Probation is not an active partner in RBS, challenges have arisen in providing full RBS services to youth who were simultaneously involved in Child Welfare and Probation.
- The lack of Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC) homes needed as bridge foster care placements for youth who are ready to transition out of the residential group home has resulted in longer stays in residential group care for youth who were otherwise ready to transition to the community.

- Some provider staff appeared to not fully understand their role, especially when transitioning from working with youth in the residential group home to working with youth in the community.
- Due to the size of Los Angeles County and the fact that only three providers are participating in the RBS pilot project, linking youth to their communities while in residential placement has been difficult.

Adaptations have been made by the Demonstration Site to enhance service delivery and improve case outcomes. The most important adaptations are discussed below.

- The role of the crisis mobilization team has been modified from a general focus on crisis stabilization in the community to aggressive outreach to schools in advance to determine and explain the safety plan for crisis management for youth enrolled in RBS.
- The safety plan for crisis management has been modified to identify a single person to contact first. That person then evaluates the situation and determines who else to involve. This replaced an unprioritized list of possible names to call, avoiding confusion and delays.

Observations and Recommendations of the Site Review Team:

The following are observations and recommendations the Site Review Team made in addition to those identified above by the Demonstration Site:

- Successfully transitioning youth out of residential group care within an average of nine months is a fundamental component of the Los Angeles Demonstration Site's RBS program model and critical to the sustainability of its funding model. Although the Los Angeles provider incentive is based on a 10 month maximum stay in residential group care, the funding model projects an average nine month stay in residential group care. Review of the RBS Days of Care Schedule identified that, of 81 youth enrolled in the RBS program during the reporting period, four youth successfully exited from the RBS program to a permanent placement. Forty-seven youth were enrolled in the RBS program (residential plus community placement) for nine months or more. Of those youth, 30 (64 percent) remained in RBS group residential placement longer than the target goal of nine months by the end of the reporting period. Because the reporting period covers only 10 months, the total length of time in residential group home placement for these youth is unknown. During the reporting period, four youth returned to residential group care after transitioning to a bridge foster care or permanent placement, and three youth were disenrolled from the RBS program prior to achieving permanency. Los Angeles should continue closely monitoring the progress of youth transitioning from residential group home to the community in order to identify ways to improve achievement of targeted timeframes. The county and providers should consider additional steps to assure bridge-care and permanent placement families fully understand that services are available to them to prevent the need to return the youth to group residential placement, and how and when to access those services. Also, the county should consider routinely conducting a more thorough analysis of the disenrollments compared to

the successful exits to determine what factors contribute to premature discharges from RBS and the appropriate steps to take to mitigate those factors.

- Social Worker commitment to and participation in RBS is critical to its success. The county should consider implementing all steps possible to ensure full Social Worker participation in CFTs. Possibilities include, mandating Social Workers attend CFT meetings, providing incentives for participating in CFTs and/or penalties for not participating in CFTs, assigning all RBS child welfare cases to one group of dedicated Social Workers for the remainder of the pilot project, and/or aggressively engaging county leadership to reassert its commitment to ensure full Social Worker participation in RBS.
- Consider providing on-going, one-on-one, RBS training to Social Workers and new county staff. The county could consider revising their social marketing materials to include more tangible success stories of the RBS program to build trust and confidence among Social Workers. Also, consider identifying county champions to help facilitate the culture shift among their colleagues.
- Since RBS is a major shift from traditional group care, consider additional ways of reinforcing for county line staff the shift to CFT decision-making from professional independent decision-making. Also consider clarifying and reinforcing roles of group home staff when youth transition from the residential group home to the community. Also, consider ongoing trainings to facilitate culture change for all providers (including group home and ITFC), all participating county agencies, and families.
- To begin resolving family conflict, consider addressing conflict during family therapy and teaching families skills and communication strategies to resolve these conflicts in the best interests of the child.
- Consider developing requirements for the minimum level of family-focused therapeutic services to be offered to each RBS youth/family.
- Consider engaging Probation in RBS and providing on-going RBS foundational training to Probation Officers.
- Continue aggressively recruiting ITFC homes. Consider community outreach and/or targeted recruitment to identify possible ITFC homes.
- Consider utilizing geographically based ISC teams to cover the vast geographic area that Los Angeles serves. Also consider expanding knowledge of local community resources to aid in providing services to youth and families in their communities.
- Consider creating an expedited process to waive minor infractions found on criminal background clearances of some family members so they can be approved as permanency placements. Consider engaging the county Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) manager to develop this streamlined process.
- Some of the youth expressed concern that their voice was not being heard during the CFTs. Also, youth were unclear on their overall and intermediate goals in RBS and on their individual timeframes for transition into the community. Youth also reported that the aggressive behaviors of other youth in the RBS program were negatively impacting them. In addition to conducting an internal RBS site review, the county should consider implementing additional oversight measures to identify and address challenges reported by youth. Also, consider working

with providers to ensure that youth and family voice and choice is fully respected in CFTs, that goals and transition plans are made clear to youth, and that youth's concerns regarding the behavior of their peers during therapy are addressed appropriately.

- Review of the comprehensive care plans found that the Plans of Care were organized and appropriately included notes describing permanency efforts and linkages to community-based services. However, it was difficult to determine if progress was being made toward achieving the identified goals because the Plans of Care did not contain that level of detail. Consideration should be given to updating target goals within the Plans of Care.

Training and/or Technical Assistance Requested:

The Demonstration Site requested the following:

- UC Davis training on role specifics for RBS staff.
- Training and skill building for mental health clinicians on compassion fatigue, time management, and targeted mental health needs.
- Training for Social Workers on trauma-informed practice.
- Advanced training on CFT facilitation techniques.
- Refresher training on the values and principles of strength-based, family-centered care.

Other:

Two youth, each in a separate RBS provider facility, alleged during the youth interviews that they had been inappropriately restrained by RBS provider staff. Formal reports of these incidences have been made and the appropriate follow-up action is being taken independent of the RBS Site Review process.

Conclusions:

The Los Angeles RBS Demonstration Project operating structure is in substantial conformance with the program described in its Memorandum of Understanding with the California Department of Social Services and with the principles of RBS. However, the challenges discussed above have limited full implementation of RBS practice and need to be resolved. Until more data is available, it remains too early to draw conclusions about client outcomes and fiscal implications.

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