

Los Angeles County Can Better Invest in Families and Communities with Flexible Federal Funds

A close examination of the use of federal Title IV-E Waiver funds reveals an opportunity for Los Angeles County to keep families together, strengthen communities and reduce the number of at risk youth that are placed outside the home in foster care or other group home settings.

Background

Founded in 2013, the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) is a nonprofit organization based in Los Angeles, CA. To accomplish its mission of changing lives and creating safe, healthy communities, ARC provides a supportive network and reentry services to formerly incarcerated individuals, and advocates for fair policies in California's juvenile and criminal justice systems. ARC's framework incorporates both direct support and policy advocacy in order to have the greatest impact on reducing recidivism and improving community health.

Through its policy work, ARC advocates for systemic changes to California's juvenile and criminal justice systems that reduce over-reliance on incarceration, while at the same time promoting public safety. ARC

also advocates for increasing investment in the vulnerable communities that are most likely to experience violence, trauma, crime, and incarceration. Unlike most legal and research-based policy groups, ARC's policy work is informed by direct experience and conducted by formerly incarcerated individuals who have transformed their lives. ARC members serve as ambassadors to

show lawmakers what is possible when individuals coming home from incarceration receive adequate support. By empowering community involvement in local and state dialogues, ARC reduces the gaps in these discussions and informs decision-making with personal testimony and evidence-based practice.

Through its work with youth in the Los Angeles area, ARC noticed the negative effect of youth being removed from their homes and put in residential placements. Over the past year, ARC has been meeting with Los Angeles County Probation officials and reviewing reports and data to better understand the challenge and develop recommendations. The following brief is a summary of our findings.

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The Challenge of Out of Home Placements

When a child welfare agency determines that a child is "unsafe" or the juvenile justice system determines a youth is "too dangerous," he or she is often taken out of their home and placed in a foster care or group home setting. A primary reason for removing a child from their family home is parental "neglect." Much of this neglect, however, is neither malicious nor deliberate, but often due to poverty.

The foster homes, group homes, and private juvenile facilities to which youth are sent are very expensive, costing more than \$300 per day per child. If the young person has a mental health challenge, those costs can double. Federal funds that pay for residential placements, known as Title IV-E funds, prohibit any of the monies being spent on the child's natural family – which could often help alleviate some of the challenges of poverty that contributed to the "dangerous" or "unsafe" conditions in the first place. Instead, these funds are sent to states and passed on to counties to make out of home placement decisions and payments.

For youth in the juvenile justice system, courts and probation departments use the same network and process of out of home placement if a youth is to be taken out of the community due to his or her delinquent behavior. Though sometimes referred to as group homes, youth sent to out of home placement by the juvenile justice system are usually placed in large, private, secure juvenile facilities. Hence, in effect, these youth are incarcerated. And far too often, youth are sent to these placements not as a result of a new delinquent offense, but a technical violation of the terms of their probation.

Group homes and even larger congregate care facilities to which many youth are sent have proven ineffective and even harmful. On average, youth in Los Angeles spend one year in out of home placements, a length of time that is expensive, disruptive, and detrimental to youth and their families. The system often sends youth to private,



secure juvenile facilities that are located far away from their families, oftentimes out of state, making family counseling and support nearly impossible. A recent national study by Juvenile Law Center revealed that length of stay in juvenile placements should be reduced to six months or less – half the time most youth in Los Angeles County spend in placements. Research shows that placement beyond six months in a juvenile facility fails to reduce recidivism and, worse, is often detrimental to youth, regardless of the type of offense committed.

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Another study by the University of Illinois found that youth who experience out of home placements in the child welfare system are more likely than youth who remain in their home to engage in delinquency. The report also found that youth with multiple placements – the vast majority of youth in the juvenile justice system who have gone to placement – have far worse outcomes than youth with stable living environments.

In 2006, the federal government allocated more than \$6 billion dollars in Title IV-E funds to states for foster care placements. The next year, a promising shift took place: Los Angeles and Alameda Counties were the only two counties in California to participate in the first of its kind five-year pilot “Waiver” initiative. Under the Waiver, participating jurisdictions receive a capped allocation of Title IV-E funds (based on average annual spending over the previous three years) that could be used to pay for placements, as usual, or for services and supports that prevent placement of children outside their homes. Any jurisdiction receiving the Waiver would in turn be financially penalized if its number of out of home placements increase, and would not be qualified to receive the additional funds to pay for those placements. Conversely, if a jurisdiction reduces the number of youth sent to placement, it can create substantial savings that can be used to fund youth development programs in the community, or even provide families with direct support.

L.A. County between 2007 - 2010

- **23%** foster care reduction
- **1/3** reduction in group home placements
- **\$11 million** saving from reduction in Probation out-of-home placements

The cost of an out of home placement can be extreme. In California, the level of private facility to which most youth in the juvenile justice system are sent costs \$115,000 annually for each youth. Reducing the number of youth sent to these placements by just 10 can save a jurisdiction more than one million dollars each year. Hence the potential cost savings are huge.

Between July 2007 and February 2010, Los Angeles County reduced its foster care population by 23 percent. The number of children placed in group homes and other institutionalized settings declined by more than one-third during this same period. In 2007 there were 1,600 probation youth in out of home placement in Los Angeles County and in 2015 that number was cut in half, down to 800 probation youth in placement. According to a 2010 report on Title IV-E Waiver by Casey Family Programs, in the first year of the Waiver alone, the Los Angeles County Probation Department saved \$11 million by reducing the number of youth sent to out of home placements.

Los Angeles County has also successfully reduced its use of out of home placement, which in and of itself is a very good outcome. But the county has not yet adequately invested the millions of dollars in savings created by this reduction into families and communities.

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from their homes. Alameda County has taken steps to reinvest these savings to uplift youth, families, and communities. In 2011, Alameda County launched the Title IV-E Waiver Employment program which provides fully subsidized after-school and summer youth employment to up to 900 youth in foster care or on probation. The nearly \$8 million annual program is administered by an array of community based organizations around the county. Los Angeles can benefit from replicating a similar program.

More recently, in October 2014, Los Angeles County entered a new five-year Title IV-E Waiver initiative with child well-being as the statewide goal. This time, seven other counties joined Alameda and Los Angeles counties in the Waiver initiative. This gives Los Angeles County a huge opportunity to become a national and statewide leader and further reduce the use of out of home placement – a mostly ineffective, expensive, and often harmful practice – as well as reinvest savings generated by the Waiver to improve the outcomes of youth, families, and communities.

In short, the Los Angeles County Child Welfare Department, Probation Department, the Board of Supervisors, and the community have an obligation to ensure that adequate resources are provided directly to youth and families as well as to a variety of community services.

Over the past year, ARC has been meeting with Los Angeles County Probation officials and reviewing Waiver reports. Based on a review of how Los Angeles County uses the Waiver, ARC has developed the following recommendations for the County.

Recommendations for Los Angeles County Probation Title IV-E Waiver

1. Improve the tracking and reporting of outcomes for youth who are currently in or have been in out of home placements, or who have been diverted from out of home placements. When tracking these youth, include well-being measures, such as

education and employment outcomes. The Los Angeles County Probation Department should publish an annual report showing how Title IV-E Waiver funds have been expended and how those investments have impacted youth outcomes.

2. Increase the amount of funds allocated to community services and increase the amount of funds provided directly to needy families.

3. Expand the existing Placement Screening Committee to include staff from outside agencies, including Health Care, Mental Health, Child Welfare, and the County Office of Education, representation from community based organizations, and at least one family representative.

4. Reduce length of stay in out of home placements, with a goal of youth staying no longer than six months.

5. Utilize more single-family homes as placements instead of large congregate care facilities, like Therapeutic Foster Homes or the evidenced-based Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC).

6. The Probation Department should receive funds from the State realignment of Child Welfare. Currently, although the state’s realignment of child welfare effects the Probation Department, it has not received any of the funds provided by the state.

7. Los Angeles County should build a better partnership with and learning among the now nine Waiver counties in the State. ■

References:

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² Ryan, J. and Testa, M. (2005) “**Child Maltreatment and Juvenile Delinquency: Investigating the Role of Placement and Placement Instability.**” Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

³ Casey Family Programs (2010) “**Ensuring Safe, Nurturing and Permanent Families for Children: The Need to Reauthorize and Expand Title IV-E Waivers.**” Available at <http://www.casey.org/media/WhitePaper-NeedForWaivers.pdf>

