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Testimony to the California Assembly Human Services Committee
and the Assembly Select Committee on Foster Care
Joint Hearing
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Good afternoon, Honorable Chairwoman Evans, Honorable Chairwoman Bass, and Assembly Committee Members. Thank you for inviting me to present at this informational hearing. I am Dr. Barbara Needell, Principal Investigator of the UC Berkeley Child Welfare Performance Indicators Project, housed at the Center for Social Services Research in the School of Social Welfare. For over 10 years now, under an interagency agreement with the California Department of Social Services, and with funding from both the Department and the Stuart Foundation, we have worked closely with our state and county partners to develop and provide ongoing information about our child welfare system. Using primarily administrative data extracted from the CWS/CMS system, we produce tabular reports at the state and county level, post them on a public website (<http://cssr.berkeley.edu/cwscmsreports>), and update them quarterly. Breakouts are available by age, race/ethnicity, and gender, and we can track changes in performance over time. I would like to thank Emily Putnam Hornstein, one of our doctoral students, for helping to prepare today's presentation, and would like to acknowledge our other dedicated project staff---we all truly believe that it is the role of academics, particularly those in our public universities, to support the real work being done by California's child welfare professionals and community partners.

Let me begin by congratulating the Legislature for AB636—the groundbreaking legislation that was the foundation of our Child Welfare Improvement and Accountability System—a system that tracks outcomes for children—a system that is still itself just a toddler. After becoming law in 2001, a work group with a wide range of constituents, and with consultants from the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, was convened and met for months. This group developed measures that would serve as a starting point in our ongoing process of collecting, analyzing, and applying administrative data to hold ourselves accountable. These initial measures were used by all counties as they mobilized local teams to write Self Assessments, developed System Improvement Plans,

and identified areas to focus on in Peer Quality Case Reviews. The local teams were in the best position to use the data intelligently, to identify strengths and challenges, and to craft appropriate responses. The results have been astounding. After just two years, and only 15 months after county System Improvement Plans were signed off by local Boards of Supervisors, we can see measurable statewide improvement throughout our system.

Before I provide some detail about what the data are telling us, let me offer a bit of background about some key issues, fundamental to the appropriate use of administrative data in child welfare. These data can be extracted and reconfigured into longitudinal files---files that follow individual children throughout their entire child welfare experience. With longitudinal data, there are three primary ways to view and examine outcomes---using entries, exits, and point in time analyses. All views are important, and each one gives a different but critical perspective. Something as common as the age of foster children can serve as an example. How old are children in foster care? While nearly a quarter of the children who enter foster care for the first time are infants, only 4 percent of those who leave are infants, and only 5 percent of those in care on a given day are infants. More than half of first entries are under the age of six. However, most children who are in care on any given day (about 75%) are over the age of five, and nearly half are age eleven or older. This, of course, is more than an interesting data artifact---it has major implications for the targeting of resources, and is crucial information that would be lost if we restricted ourselves to just one view of data.

Unfortunately, the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) use many measures (the national standards) that are drawn from a dataset, (The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System--AFCARS), that does not have the capacity to fully track entries over time, even though this view is arguably the most important when it comes to understanding system performance ¹. Reliance on the national standards gives an incomplete and possibly flawed view of performance over time. This is why we have added state measures to AB636---so we can have the best possible understanding of how we are doing, and where we need to direct additional resources.

CWS/CMS data allows us to start at the beginning of a child and family's interaction with our system, at the point of an initial child abuse report, and continues to track the child throughout the system--through investigation, placement decisions, and exits, and through additional child welfare interactions if they occur. Although we can and do measure performance at all of the key decision points, a true understanding requires that we view the entire cycle of performance measures in concert, so that we can sort out the ways in which the measures are counterbalanced, or dependent upon one another. For example, reunification from foster care is generally considered a positive outcome, yet a county that brings many children into care (some perhaps unnecessarily) may find it easier to reunify quickly than a county that has reduced the numbers of children entering foster care, but is left with a smaller, more

¹ Courtney, M., Needell, B., & Wulczyn, B. (2004). Unintended consequences of the push for accountability: the case of national child welfare performance standards. Children and Youth Services Review, 26, 1141-1154.

challenging group of children and families to reunify. Similarly, high rates of reunification may be problematic if many of the children who do go home turn around and come back into foster care at a later date.

Now I would like to turn specifically to what recent outcome data are indicating. When we examine measures that we at UCB have developed and compare the performance statewide that was documented when AB636 first went into effect (January 2004) to performance in the most recent report (January 2006), we see that every one of the measures is changing in the right direction. Given the short time frame, this kind of across the board improvement is extremely impressive, and provides evidence that AB636 is making a difference-- that counties are using their data, and that our child welfare system is getting better. While some improvements are substantial (29.4% increase in adoptions within 24 months of entry and 19.4% decrease in the number of children entering who are initially placed in congregate care), others are modest (1.4% increase in reunification within 12 months). Even this small improvement in reunification is something to be proud of, however, since it is coupled with both a decrease in the rate of children entering care (3.4% decrease) and a decrease in foster care reentry (6.7% decrease).

To be sure, individual counties have not all improved on all measures, but this is to be expected. Counties used the data appropriately, selectively targeting areas to focus on during this first three year cycle of the AB636 process.

While we firmly believe that the public presentation of detailed performance data at the state and county level is a bold but necessary part of system improvement, it does invite not only data use, but also has the potential for data abuse. County rankings on individual measures give us no information at all on how a site has improved over time-- if all counties improve at the same rate, each individual county will not change at all in its ranked position!

Composite scores, that sum together performance across a number of measures, give no information about the underlying performance in different areas, and therefore tell us nothing about what we need to work on. A county could be midrange in a statewide composite score either because it is performing at midrange on all measures or because it is being rated exceptionally high on some and exceptionally low on others. Because we have a number of very small counties in California, with correspondingly small child welfare caseloads, we must use care when interpreting percentages, rates, etc. A recent newspaper editorial condemned a county for being the worst in the Bay Area on a particular measure, however a quick trip to our website would have revealed that this performance was based on just one child (and for the record, in the next quarter the same county had no children reflected in this same measure---does this mean they went from being the worst county to being the best county?).

As I explained earlier, knowing which view of data to use for what purpose is important. Using exit cohorts to track reunification and adoption, as the national standards do, is misleading. If we were to “teach to the test” in California and try only to improve on these measures, we would have no incentive to increase our actual rate of reunifications and adoptions, especially because continuing to consider permanency for children in long term care (reunifying children after 12 months or adopting children after 24 months) will actually decrease performance on these federal

measures. (The national standards only consider the time to reunification and adoption for children who have experienced these outcomes, regardless of whether permanency is increasing or decreasing).

Intelligent and appropriate use of data involves tracking county specific performance over time, paying attention to age, gender and race/ethnicity breakouts, a thorough understanding of the interaction among outcomes (counterbalance), and in particular the ability to make change at the local level. Even what looks like similar performance in two counties can be for quite different reasons. The interpretation of data at the local level, by county child welfare staff and their partners, is what takes that data and turns it into useful information that can guide policy and practice. Inappropriate data use and misinterpretation is at best a distraction, and at worst can impede true reform and improvement.

In closing, let me again congratulate the Legislature, the state agencies, and of course the counties for AB636. I encourage you to find ways to continue to support and improve upon the achievements realized thus far. As a university partner, it is an honor to collaborate with all of you—to help to provide useful data that is really making a difference in the lives of California’s most vulnerable children and families.

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ATTACHMENT: Powerpoint Presentation-- Needell_AB636_030706_Final

(Can be downloaded from cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSReports/presentations)