

## CHAPTER 2 EXTENDED VOLUNTARY PLACEMENT – FINAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Title IV-E Child Welfare Waiver Demonstration Project Extended Voluntary Placement Component

#### Introduction

This report discusses the implementation process, early phase-down, results and conclusions of California's Title IV-E Child Welfare Waiver Demonstration Project, Extended Voluntary Placement Component (EVC). The program was implemented on December 1, 1998 and phased down on August 31, 2000.

California's Child Welfare Waiver Demonstration Project was approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) on August 19, 1997. Among the interventions being tested by the demonstration project, the Extended Voluntary Placement Component (EVC) allowed selected counties to waive the six-month limit on federal foster care funds for voluntary placements. Current federal law requires counties to establish court dependency in order to maintain federal eligibility beyond six months. Under the demonstration project, selected counties were provided the option of extending voluntary placements to a maximum of 12 months without a court dependency hearing or loss of federal foster care payment eligibility. A Request for Proposals (RFP) was distributed in January 1998 to all 58 counties in California, inviting their participation in a competitive bid for inclusion in the EVC. Seven counties responded to the RFP and all were selected. A parallel state Waiver, announced on August 14, 1998, allowed participating counties to provide the same intervention to state-eligible children. Expected benefits of the Extended Voluntary Placement Component revolved around the absence of court intervention, including an expected reduction in family-agency conflict, court-imposed delays and court-related costs.

The evaluation of the EVC consisted of three inter-related components: (1) an *Impact Study* that was designed to measure outcomes related to the experimental intervention for children and families; (2) a *Cost Study* that was designed to evaluate the extent to which county programs remained cost-neutral to the state and federal governments and measure the cost effectiveness of experimental programs; and (3) a *Process Study* that was to examine the changes required to implement the experimental interventions and the context in which county programs operated. The University of California, Berkeley, Center for Social Services Research, was selected by the CDSS to evaluate the EVC and other interventions being tested by the demonstration project.

#### Methods

A quasi-experimental design utilizing tracking of administrative outcomes for matched experimental and comparison groups was selected for the EVC *Impact Study*. The *Impact Study* was designed to test the hypothesis that, when compared with traditional voluntary placements, the the option to extend voluntary placements from the existing six-month limit to a maximum of twelve months would (1) decrease court costs; (2) increase the percentage of voluntarily placed children who were reunified within a twelve-month period; (3) decrease the percentage of children in dependency status; (4) maintain or improve levels of child safety; and (5) result in high levels of client satisfaction.

The *Impact Study* was designed to compare administrative outcomes recorded in the Child Welfare Services Case Management System (CWS/CMS) for up to 500 experimental group children and 500 comparison group children, while in-depth case record reviews and telephone

satisfaction interviews were to be conducted with a randomly selected sub-sample. Seven counties were selected to participate in the experimental group, and each was matched with one or more comparison counties.

The *Cost Study* was charged with two missions: (1) to evaluate the extent to which county programs remained cost-neutral to the state and federal governments, and (2) to measure the cost-effectiveness of experimental and comparison county programs. Because primary responsibility for examining the cost neutrality of county programs fell to the state, methods and results presented in this report emphasize the evaluation team's efforts to design the *Cost-Effectiveness Study*.

Due to anticipated challenges with implementing the *Cost-Effectiveness Study*, the evaluation team decided to perform a general cost-effectiveness analysis for most counties, while focusing on two or three experimental counties and their comparison counties for in-depth analysis. Efforts to develop *Cost Study* methods resulted in identifying the key cost areas and a proposed data collection plan that relied as much as possible on the CWS/CMS data that counties were already collecting. The evaluation team prepared a presentation of the data collection plan in order to solicit feedback from counties on the feasibility of the plan. Due to the early phase-down of the EVC, the plan was presented to only one comparison county. Feedback from this county was generally positive, however, with a few suggested modifications to the plan.

The third component of the evaluation, the *Process Study*, was charged with exploring the implementation and operation of EVC programs, as well as potential influences on the outcome of voluntary placement and EVC services in all experimental and comparison counties.

Data for the *Process Study* were drawn from county proposals and addendums; focus groups conducted with agency staff during scheduled site visits; periodic Consortium Meetings with CDSS, UCB and county program staff; a CDSS electronic mail survey regarding EVC implementation; evaluation team telephone contact with EVC counties; and telephone exit interviews with counties withdrawing from the study.

### **Results**

EVC implementation progressed far more slowly than expected. No more than ten children were enrolled during the 21-month enrollment period. In addition, three of the seven experimental counties withdrew from the program due to implementation difficulties. Multiple strategies to promote utilization of the experimental intervention were pursued by the state and evaluation team without success. The lack of enrollment and county withdrawals led to a decision to phase the program down on August 31, 2000. Due to the early phase-down, no *Impact Study* results are available.

Design work for the *Cost-Effectiveness Study* resulted in the creation of an intermediate data collection plan. Despite a promising fit between EVC program goals and cost-effectiveness analysis, efforts to implement an in-depth study across multiple county agencies uncovered significant challenges. Implementation challenges included differences in the structure of county programs, divergent approaches among counties to use of the CWS/CMS fields requested for the evaluation and difficulty with developing low-impact data collection methods for costs not already recorded by counties.

*Process Study* results indicated that experimental and comparison counties had similar approaches to use of voluntary placement, and that it was primarily used to provide short-term care in cases with a good prognosis for reunification. Most voluntarily placed children were reunified prior to the end of the six-month voluntary placement period. Among all experimental and comparison counties, none viewed voluntary placement as a widely applicable intervention.

Planning for the EVC took place over an extended period of time, beginning in January 1998 in some counties, and continuing until December 1999, by which time the last county to enroll a child had done so. While experimental counties as a whole began implementation with a wide range of target populations, over time counties gravitated toward viewing the EVC as a tool to use in cases involving older children or for children with mental health concerns.

The *Process Study* also revealed the reasons for the low program enrollment and county withdrawals from the EVC. Reasons included: (1) county concern regarding the fact that courts did not count the time in voluntary placement in determining when to terminate reunification services and parental rights; (2) difficulty with identifying which cases might benefit from an extended voluntary placement; (3) concern regarding the potential impact of parental liability for costs incurred during voluntary placement on parent participation; (4) agency problems with staff recruitment, retention and workload and other resource limitations; and (5) an overestimation of existing voluntary placement cases, resulting from inaccurately maintained county CWS/CMS records.

### **Conclusions**

EVC hypotheses remain untested due to extremely low enrollment and the program's early termination after one and a half years. Due to multiple implementation challenges, the EVC proved to have quite limited applicability. Nonetheless, important lessons were learned throughout implementation of the EVC *Impact, Cost and Process Studies* that are of value to child welfare policy, future research and practice involving voluntary placement, as well as other child welfare services programs.

Lessons learned concern the influence of factors external to county agencies and the demonstration project, as well as agency-related influences on program success. Some factors that impeded implementation might prove equally challenging to other child welfare innovations while others had a clearly unique impact on the EVC.

Greater coordination is needed between multiple, innovative child welfare services initiatives at the state and county levels to minimize the drain on limited county resources and increase the probability of program success. Smaller programs and those that are voluntary can be expected to be more acutely affected by resource limitations due to their lower visibility and decreased priority within child welfare agencies.

The introduction of CWS/CMS provides an exciting opportunity for research; however, greater attention must be given to expanding use and ensuring the consistency and accuracy of data entered before many research opportunities can be realized. Pervasive errors resulting from inaccurate data entry and/or failure to update records also negatively impact the ability of counties to monitor voluntary placement programs.

Recent policy initiatives that emphasize concurrent planning and shorter time frames to permanency had a significant detrimental impact on the EVC due to an initial lack of clarity regarding court approaches to voluntary placement cases, and counties' ultimate discovery that courts would not count voluntary placement time in determining when to terminate reunification services and parental rights. The newly finalized federal regulations for the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) seek to ensure timely permanence for all children in foster care who cannot reunify, including those who are voluntarily placed. However, enforcement of these regulations for voluntarily placed children would have compromised not only the goals of the EVC program, but also the rights of parents to legal counsel. When the child is voluntarily placed, the legal process may not be engaged until six valuable months have passed. Had the EVC been implemented under ASFA regulations, parents who accepted the voluntary placement extension but were still unable to reunify could have found that their first day in court was to decide the

permanent placement of the child. Costly legal battles would likely then ensue. ASFA allows for certain exceptions to the regulations requiring states to initiate proceedings to terminate parental rights. If voluntarily placed children fall under these exceptions, then voluntary placements serve to extend children's timeframes to permanency when parents are unable to reunify. If ASFA is strictly applied to voluntary placement cases, court challenges concerning the abrogation of parents' legal rights will likely result. Thus, it is likely that ASFA will have an inhibiting effect on provision of voluntary placement services, unless child welfare workers have complete confidence that cases will be resolved within the six-month voluntary placement period. Further, as long as efforts to ensure timely permanence for children take precedence in child welfare over family-centered, voluntary approaches, programs such as the EVC will not succeed.