

Legislative Auditor

OVERVIEW

STUDY OF FOSTER CARE IN HAWAII

Honolulu, Hawaii

February 1990

Summary

Foster care is the system of programs and services to support children who cannot live in their own homes because of the inability or unwillingness of parents to provide even marginal care. The need for foster care is growing both nationally and in Hawaii, but at the same time, adequate services have become increasingly difficult to provide. New and complex problems affect the children who need help, and demographic and economic factors restrict the supply of foster parents.

Recognizing these problems, the Legislature in 1989 requested the legislative auditor to study Hawaii's system of foster care. After soliciting proposals from experts in the field, the auditor

selected a consortium of five national organizations to conduct the study under the auspices of the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Management and Administration of the University of Southern Maine.

The examination of Hawaii's foster care efforts reveals that in its struggle to deal with the problems associated with family deterioration and child abuse and neglect, Hawaii has not kept pace with advances in the field as set forth by the goals of federal legislation on foster care. The consultants make numerous recommendations and provide a blueprint for overhauling Hawaii's current approach to foster care.

FINDINGS

Hawaii lacks a unified system of foster care and instead operates a series of discrete and uncoordinated programs.

Compared to experience elsewhere, Hawaii is over-using foster care in both the number of placements and the length of time children spend in foster care. Some practices lack sensitivity and add to the trauma experienced by children going into foster care.

Hawaii has an acute shortage of foster parents and is not adequately using this valuable resource. Other services to Hawaii's foster children and their families are severely limited.

In the face of heavy staff turnover and high social worker caseloads, the Department of Human Services is having difficulty translating its improvement plans into effective action.

Because adoption is not emphasized, many of Hawaii's children have become "stuck" in the system. Also lacking is a coherent approach to preparing older adolescents for adulthood and independent living.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hawaii should set up a mechanism to coordinate the actions of different agencies in the field of child welfare and foster care. The State should also broaden and improve its foster care services in such areas as prevention, placement, support, teamwork, and independent living.

The role of foster parents should be enhanced by improving recruitment and training, clarifying rights and responsibilities, and encouraging adoptions by foster parents.

The coordination and direction of foster care should be improved by enlarging the role of the new Office of Youth Services, assuring

plans are translated into action, revamping information systems, and closing gaps between central office and field staff.

Social worker vacancies should be filled and caseloads reduced by modifying entry qualifications and increasing training. Procedural steps should be taken to claim the large amounts of available foster care funds.

Statutory and procedural changes should be made to promote permanent homes for foster children, to enhance foster care review, and to improve legal protection and representation.

RESPONSE

The affected agencies agreed in general with the study's findings and recommendations. There was broad consensus that the study provides useful guidance for improving Hawaii's approach to foster care.