

Children and Families Commission

Community Meeting and Focus Group Comments Report

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the contributions from the community to the Children and Families Commission. This information was collected during a series of community meetings and targeted focus groups. The eight (8) community meetings were conducted in communities throughout the county over a period of 5 weeks. The four (4) focus groups were held during the same period. They were held to target the parents that use the local childcare services, and the staff that supports and directs those programs. (see appendix for schedule)

In total, there were approximately 225 people who attended the 12 meetings throughout the county. Of these, approximately 61 attended at the various South county locations. Another 70 from the North county attended (some of these were at the San Luis Obispo meeting sites). Along the North coast 35 came to the two meetings there. More than 75 were present at the 3 venues in San Luis Obispo.

To characterize those who attended, there were always some parents present. A few of these brought their children. Each meeting had a number of childcare program providers. These were often the most vocal at each site. A few healthcare and social worker professionals were at most of the meetings. Finally, there were a handful of interested community individuals. These participants often had the most interesting ideas to support the development of the children in our communities.

This data was collected as an essential component to guide the development of the Strategic Plan for San Luis Obispo county. This strategic plan will guide the Commission in its efforts to improve the conditions that children face as they grow up within this community.

OUTLINE: This report is a summary of the abundant amount of information that was collected during the meetings. Following the summary is a grid that was developed to help visualize the amount of interest expressed on each topic. Finally, there is a listing of the comments made at each venue.

DATA REPORT

Improving Family Functioning: Strong Families

There was substantial consensus throughout the county in many of the issues that are within this category. The primary issue that was consistently expressed at each of the sessions was the need to support parenting skills. Parents want help in: 1) Knowing how to care for their children, 2) Getting information to help them with their children, 3) Finding

support and encouragement from other parents and professionals. This is especially important for first time parents and teens, during the first year or two of raising their children.

To provide for the Education and Family Support for Pregnancy and Newborn, there was general support for a program that would have someone visit all mothers after the delivery of their child. This person should visit in the hospital and then follow-up at the home of the mother. Promoting breast-feeding was discussed at only a couple of the meetings, but was a very emotional topic for those who brought it up.

Providing for Education and Family Support to Enhance Parenting and Child Development was discussed at most of the meetings. Parenting education was a popular topic. This education is thought to need to continue for all parents in the community. To be convenient to get to this education needs to be: 1) locally based, 2) at times when parents are able to attend, 3) target special groups (i.e; Spanish speakers and single parents), and 4) with incentives to encourage parents to attend (i.e; childcare, meals, transportation, rewards, etc.)

Parents also want support groups, mentors, and networking / play groups. They are anxious to have ready access to information that will direct them to all the services available.

Reading and Literacy were mentioned at a few of the meetings.

Support for Family Stability and Well-being was a common topic among the participants. People were interested to see that there was counseling support for families. The most common group mentioned were mothers who are suffering with post-partum depression. Other groups mentioned were children of parents in substance abuse therapy, and families who are going through a divorce.

Parents in many areas are looking for networking and support groups. They want programs to support the children within homeless families. Another common shared need was respite care for families who are feeling overwhelmed, tired, and unable to cope at times.

Improved Child Development: Children Learning and Ready for School

This was the most commonly addressed strategic area at all of the meetings. People throughout the county want support to develop high quality, affordable, accessible, and available for all ages and throughout the day. This subject is either a touchstone of community need, or has very vocal supporters throughout the community. Those who attended the meetings expressed an almost dire need for childcare to enable them to work to support their families.

To provide Support for High-Quality Child Care and Early Education Programs, childcare training was a prevailing issue throughout. Childcare providers and parents both recognize the importance of training individuals to care for children with special needs.

To ensure that there are enough quality childcare providers available better pay and / or incentives were declared to be essential for recruitment and retention. To ensure that they have time to get continuing education, or if out sick there needs to be relief or substitute care.

At many of the meetings there was expressed the need for better availability of a resource library. The Economic Opportunity Commission lending library was mentioned as an example of this type of service. But this resource is not available for many of the childcare providers. Another desire of the childcare providers is to be able to afford site monitoring at all of the programs in the county.

The favorite topic at many of the meetings was **Adequate and Accessible Supply of High-Quality Child Care**. There does not seem to be an adequate supply of childcare to meet the demand. Those who attended want childcare for their infants, for children with special needs, for their children when they are mildly ill. They need childcare throughout the day and every day of the week. Those in the federally or state sponsored programs want the services provided all day long, not just for 3 hours.

A shortage of adequate space was a common lament. The multitude of certification requirements for licensed facilities create a burden that prevents small private providers from expanding or moving to a new site. This obviously limits their ability to augment childcare services.

Those attending who are not in Head Start or State Preschool, would like to see all preschool childcare to be more comprehensive. They would like these programs to ensure that children are ready for Kindergarten and ready to read when they graduate to school. There are many children who come from families that do not speak English at home, this creates the need for special language programs to prepare the children for school.

Access to childcare was addressed. The most common concern was distance to the program. Many people have to drive long distances to find openings. They hope that there could be neighborhood based childcare. This would be accomplished if there were childcare facilities within or near the public schools.

Affordable Child Care for all Families was a favorite topic. The high cost was addressed in a number of ways. Many asked for subsidies to enable them to keep their children in good programs. People cited that there are often not any reliable family members to provide for their children. It was mentioned that it is not uncommon for parents to leave preschool children in the care of their elementary children.

There were proposals for Universal childcare. To help childcare programs reduce the cost to the families there were also proposals for partnerships with churches and businesses to support the housing and development of centers.

Improved Child Health: Healthy Children

Compared with the attention that was given to the first two Strategic Result Areas, Healthy Children was not a significant topic of discussion. There were only two areas that were consistently addressed at the meetings; dental treatment, and the early detection and treatment of developmental delays and communication deficits. Other issues of healthcare access or health problems were sprinkled through the various meetings.

Access to dental care was a significant concern to those who attended the meetings. There are only 2 or 3 dentists in the county who will take children under 5. Two of these will take children on MediCal, but this results in waiting lists that can be months long. There are screening programs that go out to some of the licensed preschools. Each year they find more than a few dozen children who have severe and urgent dental problems. These are not being addressed with the current resources available. One parent stated that she returns to Orange county whenever she needs to take her children for dental care.

Fluoridation was discussed at many of the meetings. It was discussed that those children who live in San Luis Obispo have substantially less dental caries. Those who live in all the other towns in the county have severe caries. The reason for this is fluoridation. Only San Luis Obispo has fluoridated water. The physicians and dentists who attended emphasized that every other town needs to provide this supplementation for its citizens.

The early detection and treatment of deficits and delays was a dominant theme throughout the county. Parents are frustrated by the lack of attention given by their physicians to the developmental delays and communication deficits of their infants and toddlers. They feel that the problems are not addressed early and referred to treatment in a timely manner. They would like to have more frequent hearing, speech and vision screening, at younger ages. There is also a need for appropriate referrals for diagnosis and therapy. Support and advocacy during this process is also needed by the families. They also want to be able to provide as much of the treatment as possible for their child. This was a very emotional topic for a number of parents at a variety of the sites.

Though as a topic domestic violence was not discussed often, when it was those who were familiar with its pervasiveness were very adamant regarding the need to address it and its prevention within the community.

A few mentioned access to healthcare for all children. There are a variety of programs in the community to cover children, but not all children are eligible for them. Even when children are covered there are other barriers to care. A healthcare advocacy program should be established to ensure that children get the services that they need.

Finally, it was urged to attend to the mental health needs of the children.