

Peer Quality Case Review in California:  
A Summary of Findings of County Reports  
and  
Assessment of the PQCR Process

Analysis and Report by  
Lynn R. DeLapp  
Davis Consultant Network  
for the  
Child and Family Policy Institute of California

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## **Section I Introduction to PQCR Findings**

California Assembly Bill 636 (Steinberg, October 2001) established the Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability System to (a) assess how changes in the child welfare system at the county-level affect children and their families in terms of specific outcomes and (b) establish accountability for outcome performance in each of California's 58 counties (California Department of Social Services [CDSS], April 2003; September 2003). The mechanism for achieving these two broad objectives is the California Child and Family Service Reviews (C-CFSR).

The C-CFSR prescribes three integrated processes to guide system improvement in a county over the course of a three-year review cycle. The first of these processes consists of an "issue-specific" Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR) conducted by outside experts including peers from other counties. The purpose of the PQCR is to supplement the quantitative data obtained in the self-assessment with qualitative information garnered from worker and supervisor interviews regarding strengths and areas needing improvement. The second process is a six-month Self-Assessment (SA) conducted to (a) identify strengths and areas needing improvement in the local child welfare system and (b) establish baselines. The third component, the System Improvement Plan (SIP), integrates information from the SA and PQCR to (c) identify specific areas of performance and system functioning that are targeted for improvement during the review cycle, (d) establish measurable goals for improvement for each target, and (e) develop strategies for accomplishing change.

Each county has now completed the first full cycle of the process. This report summarizes the findings from 48 county Peer Quality Case Review Reports, and provides an assessment of the process gathered from interviews with staff consultants from California Department of Social Services assigned to assist counties with PQCRs, trainers from the Regional Training Academies, and probation and child welfare services managers responsible for implementing the PQCR process in four counties. Section II of this report provides descriptive and statistical information about the 48 county reports summarized in this report. Section III presents a summary of PQCR findings by systemic factors, and Section IV offers an assessment of the PQCR process and seen through the eyes of key state, regional and local participants in the process.

## **Section II**

### **Statistical and Descriptive Information**

#### **PQCR**

Between 2004 and 2007, all 58 California counties completed Peer Quality Case Reviews, as part of the California Child and Family Service Reviews (C-CFSR). The purpose of the Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR) is to provide qualitative data on the child welfare system to complement the quantitative data gathered in other components of the C-CFSR. The PQCR offers the opportunity to learn, through intensive examination of each county's child welfare practices, how to improve child welfare services and probation practices around out-of-home care. The PQCR along with the Self-Assessment should inform the development and revision of County System Improvement Plans.

The PQCR process in each county required extensive planning. Over a three to six month period, counties:

- Established planning teams composed, typically of child welfare and probation managers and line staff, community partners, and representatives of families involved in the child welfare system. These teams were assisted and guided by CDSS staff and representatives from the Regional Training Academies.
- Selected a focus area for the PQCR applicable to an in depth, qualitative examination of social worker and probation practice, which addressed county priorities for system improvement (see below).
- Selected specific cases to be reviewed. During the first year, a large number, frequently over 50 cases were examined; as counties gained more experience, smaller samples ranging from 2 to 30 cases were selected.
- Identified social workers and probation officers to be interviewed.
- Designed and tested interview protocols and, where applicable focus group questions.
- Selected panelists to conduct the interviews typically composed of peer social workers, probation officers and supervisors from similar or neighboring counties, and community partners. Peer interviewers from other counties brought valuable perspectives and expertise to the process.
- Worked through a myriad of logistical details.
- Hosted "PQCR week", which included training and orientation of panel members, interviews, focus groups, and compilation of interview and focus group findings.

An assessment of this process is included in the final section of this report.

## Statistical Data on the PQCR Process

Overall statistical data on the PQCR process were compiled. They include:

- Number of Reports:** This PQCR Report summarizes PQCR data from 48 counties which had submitted reports by June 2007, representing 83% of the 58 California counties. The report includes data from 43 counties that reported on both child welfare and probation services, four counties which reported only on child welfare services and one county which reported only on probation services. Specific probation data is only included for 38 counties, however, since five county reports did not distinguish probation data from CWS data.
- Number of Cases:** The 48 county reports include reviews of a total of 945 cases, of which 697 cases were identified as CWS cases, 179 cases were identified as Probation cases, and 69 cases were not clearly identified as either CWS or Probation cases
- Interviewees:** Child welfare workers and Probation Officers were interviewed in all 48 counties; child welfare and/or probation supervisors were interviewed in 35 counties.
- Interviewers:** All counties included at peer interviewers from outside of their counties; nineteen counties also used local child welfare and probation staff, including social workers, social worker supervisors, probation officers and probation supervisors. In addition, eighteen counties invited community partners to participate as interviewers, including at least three with tribal representatives.
- Focus Groups:** In addition to interviews with individual social workers, probation officers and supervisors, twenty-six counties convened focus groups to obtain more information on the focus area from those affected by the child welfare and probation systems. The type of focus group and the number of counties which hosted groups for that population are listed in the table below.

Table 1 Type of Focus Groups Hosted by Counties	
Type of Focus Group	Number of Counties
Social workers and or probation officers	15
Child welfare/probation supervisors	15
Parents of children in the system	9
Caregivers (foster parents, relative Caregivers, group homes)	8
Community partners/providers/others	8
Youth	6
Tribes	2
Court workers	1

- Tribal Issues:** Only three small rural counties focused on tribal issues. One focused on tribal relative placements for both CWS and Probation. A second

focused on building relationships between CWS and tribal personnel, and a third involved probation issues related to Indian Child Welfare Act.

- **Focus Areas:** The table below describes the PQCR focus area(s) selected by the 48 counties.

Table 2 PQCR Focus Areas			
Focus Areas	Category	Number of Counties (Child Welfare Services)	Number of Counties (Probation)
Recurrence of maltreatment	Safety	9	1
Recurrence of maltreatment – children not removed	Safety	3	0
Timely social worker visits to children	Safety	2	0
Timely response to 10-day referrals	Safety	1	0
Re-entry to foster care	Permanence	14	5
Time to reunification	Permanence	7	8
Multiple placements/ placement stability	Permanence	2	6
Time to adoption	Permanence	1	0
Transition to Adulthood	Well-Being	0	1
Family engagement/parent contacts	Systemic Factor	7	20
Services for out-of-home youth	Systemic Factor	0	1
Community engagement	Systemic Factor	0	1

## Section III

### Summary of PQR Findings by Systemic Factors

The findings from the 48 county PQR reports in this report are grouped by the seven systemic factors included in the California Child and Family Service Review, and further categorized, where appropriate, by key elements included in each systemic factor. The systemic factors included in this report include statewide information system and quality assurance, case review system, service array and resource development, agency responsiveness to the community, foster and adoptive home licensing, approval, and recruitment and staff and provider training. For each systemic factor and sub-element, the frequency of the primary strengths/best practices, challenges and recommendations cited by the counties were analyzed and tallied.

#### A. Statewide Information System and Quality Assurance

The Statewide Information System systemic factor was discussed primarily in terms of the strengths and challenges of using the Child Welfare System Case Management System (CWS/CMS). The Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) is a personal computer application that links all 58 counties and the State to a common database. Authorized CWS/CMS users enter CWS case management data into the application that documents all related child case information that ultimately populates a client database. This information tracks each case from initial contact through termination of services and provides the basis for C-CFSR performance measures. The system assists users in recording client demographics, contacts, services delivered, and placement information. The system also enables case workers to record and update assessments, create and maintain case plans, and manage the placement of children in the appropriate foster homes or facilities.

Quality Assurance was addressed during PQRs, either in terms of the SafeMeasures software used by some county child welfare systems, or in regards to county internal policies and procedures. SafeMeasures is a quality assurance reporting service that captures data from existing computerized files and links these data elements to key performance standards. SafeMeasures analyzes performance indicators for all cases in near real-time, and displays performance trends to gauge improvement and comparisons across the agency to determine consistency of service delivery.

<b>Table 3</b>				
<b>Data Systems (CWS/CMS)</b>				
	<b>CWS</b>		<b>Probation</b>	
	<b># of counties</b>	<b>% of counties</b>	<b># of counties</b>	<b>% of counties</b>
<b>Strengths</b>	7	14.6%	0	0.0%
<b>Challenges</b>	20	41.7%	3	7.9%
<b>Recommendations</b>	7	14.6%	2	5.3%

Table 4 Quality Assurance								
Frequency	Safe Measures				Procedures			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties						
Strengths	3	6.3%	0	0.0%	3	6.3%	3	7.9%
Challenges	2	4.2%	0	0.0%	10	20.8%	5	13.2%
Recommendations	6	12.5%	0	0.0%	16	33.3%	8	21.1%

Case Documentation (CWS/CMS) and Safe Measures

Strengths and Best Practices

- Seven counties (14.6%) noted strengths and best practices in their use CWS/CMS system, including workers entering their own data promptly, and the system’s value as a supervisory monitoring tool.
- Other best practices noted by counties included use of Safe Measures to monitor staff compliance.

Challenges

- Twenty counties (41.7%) reported challenges with the CWS/CMS system, citing the complexity of the system, lack of user-friendliness, delays in entering data, inadequate definitions, inability to enter data remotely, inadequate training and other factors.
- Probations officers reported that a lack of a case management system for probation cases was a serious challenge.
- Other challenges noted for both probation and CWS included inadequate laptop computers and cell phones to record case data in the field.

Recommendations

- Seven counties (14.6%) made recommendations regarding CWS/CMS, including increasing user-friendliness, improving staff training, developing standardized definitions, and improving internal procedures for data input.
- Probation officers recommended adopting a case management system for probation cases, or adapting CWS/CMS for their use.
- Several counties recommended that the State purchase Safe Measures for counties.

## Internal Policies and Procedures

### Strengths and Best Practices

- Few counties offered specific internal procedures as strengths or best practices in county PQCRs.

### Challenges and Recommendations

- Ten counties (20.8%) noted challenges regarding internal policies and procedures for CWS. Significant challenges included the hand-off of cases between caseworkers and CWS units, and a lack of clear, up-to-date and consistent overall CWS policies and procedures.
- Sixteen counties (33.3%) made recommendations regarding CWS policies and procedures. Some recommended developing or updating overall agency policies, while others recommended establishing specific policies regarding case transfers and vertical case management, family engagement and decision making, differential response, ongoing investigations, definition of abuse and maltreatment, and case and emergency response assignments.
- Eight counties (21.1%) made specific recommendations for probation policies and procedures, including developing a Standard Operating Procedures manual, streamlining Probation Officer reports, building organizational infrastructure to support officers, developing specific probation regulations and outcomes, developing procedures for monthly appointments with parents, creating new fiduciary procedures, creating an in-house training manual, and ensuring that all directives are clear and consistent with state mandates.

## B. Case Review

This category examines county experience with safety and risk assessment and statutory timeframes for permanency.

Table 5 Safety Assessment and Statutory Timeframes								
	Statutory Timeframes				Safety & Risk Assessment			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
Frequency	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
Strengths	1	2.1%	2	5.3%	10	20.8%	3	7.9%
Challenges	11	22.9%	5	13.2%	11	22.9%	2	5.3%
Recommendations	2	4.2%	1	2.6%	12	25.0%	4	10.5%

## Safety and Risk Assessment

### Strengths and Best Practices

- Ten counties (20.8%) reported best practices in the use of safety and risk assessment tools for CWS, and 3 counties (7.9%) for probation. Most reported that they used Structured Decision-Making or the Fresno tool consistently and at multiple decision points, and that the standardized tools had improved their decision-making. One county cited the value of supervisors reviewing SDMs completed by their staff.

### Challenges

- Almost an equal number of counties (11 CWS, 2 counties probation) reported challenges with safety assessment. Most challenges were in regards to either the lack of a standardized assessment tool, or to inconsistent or incomplete use of SDM. A few counties, however, reported that the SDM tool was a poor use of time or inaccurate, or was completed merely as a formality.

### Recommendations

- Twelve counties (22.9%) made CWS recommendations and four (10.5%) counties made probation recommendations regarding safety assessment. Most recommendations were to implement standardized tools, use them more consistently or to expand their use to multiple decision points. One county recommended increasing the number of probation placement assessment centers.

## Statutory Timeframes for Permanency

A significant number of counties discussed mandated timeframes for permanency.

### Strengths and Best Practices

- None identified

### Challenges

- Eleven CWS reports (22.9%) and 5 (13.2%) probation reports noted mandated timeframes as a barrier to successful outcomes for children in out-of-home care. Many stated that the timeframes were too short for parents with substance abuse issues, particularly methamphetamine, to receive treatment, stop using and reunify. Others cited the inability to assess parental needs and deliver services in the time allowed.

### Recommendations

- Few recommendations were offered, primarily around extending timeframes in specific types of cases.

**Family and Youth Engagement**

The engagement and contact with of families and youth in case planning, services and placement decisions were strong and recurring themes, as well as primary focus areas, in many county PQRs. Counties offered strengths and best practices, challenges and recommendations concerning contact and involvement of parents, youth and extended family members.

Table 6 Family and Youth Engagement												
Frequency	Parent Contact and Engagement				Youth Engagement				Involvement of Extended Family			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
Strengths	31	64.6%	19	50.0%	15	31.3%	9	50.0%	7	14.6%	4	10.5%
Challenges	14	29.2%	15	39.8%	1	2.1%	3	7.9%	3	6.3%	1	2.6%
Recommendation	7	14.6%	6	15.8%	5	10.4%	4	10.5%	3	6.3%	0	0.0%

**a. Parent Contact and Engagement**

Strengths and best practices for parent contact and involvement were described and recommended more frequently than any other systemic factor or practice. Almost two-thirds of all counties (64.6%) cited CWS strengths and practices, and over half of counties cited probation strengths and practices.

Strengths, best practices and recommendations included:

- Believe in family reunification, and then engage families to make it possible.
- Be sensitive to and address the families’ culture and language needs.
- Engage parents very early in the process, if possible immediately after detention
- Actively involve parents in case planning and placement decisions; implement processes such as Family Team Decision-making and Team Decision-Making. (cited as a best practice or recommendation by 21 counties)
- Work with parents to individualize case plans to the specific needs and circumstances of the child and family; break case plan into manageable pieces; implement a progressive approach to service:
  - Start with families “where they are”; acknowledge and celebrate incremental changes and steps toward accomplishing the case plan
  - Recognize that parents are the expert about their child; work **with** parents, rather than imposing unreasonable expectations

- Use strength-based approaches with parents; encourage parents to become self-sufficient
- Be honest regarding CWS or probation expectations for the parents and youth
- Spend adequate time with parents to get to know them and to educate them about the process. Meet with parents frequently and regularly, at least monthly. Establish meeting schedules early; meet parents in informal settings. Develop a standardized guide to parent contacts
- Use parent partners, who have been through the system and can build trust.
- Give parents credit when youth complete their probation case plan
- Follow through on commitments to families; respond to families' phone calls and inquiries
- Be familiar with services and service providers; link families quickly to needed services

### Challenges

Many CWS and probation reports listed challenges to parent engagement including:

- Lack of parental motivation or resistance to working with CWS and probation topped the list of challenges, cited by 14 (29.2%) CWS reports and 15 (39.8%) probation reports. Parental issues such as substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues, criminal background and incarceration also posed additional significant barriers.
- Systems challenges to parental engagement included high caseloads and workload, transportation difficulties, lack of follow-through, and for probation, and new mandates requiring monthly parent contacts without clear direction or procedures.

### **b. Youth Engagement**

#### Strengths, Best Practices and Recommendations

Youth engagement was considered a strength in probation services by 19 (50.0%) responding counties, and in child welfare services by 15 (31.3%) counties. Best practices and corresponding recommendations included:

- Consistent and regular contact with youth, at least monthly
- Involvement of youth in emancipation and Independent Living Services
- Positive encounters with youth, such as fishing trips and visits to amusement parks
- Early and ongoing involvement in case planning; youth articulates own specific objectives.
- Build strong relationships with youth; treat them with dignity, listen to their needs and take the time to know what is important to them. Help them stay in contact with their families, or to find another (healthy) supportive adult connection.
- Refuse to give up on the youth.
- Acknowledge progress and good behavior; hold youth accountable for completing their plan.

- Encourage youth to advocate for themselves, and to share resources with other youth

**Challenges**

- Relatively few challenges to youth engagement were described, other than a lack of client motivation, substance abuse or mental health issues, and low priority for probation youth in Independent Living Services.

**c. Involvement of Extended Family**

**Strengths and Best Practices**

- Seven counties (14.6%) cited CWS, and 4 counties (10.5%) cited probation strengths and best practices concerning the involvement of extended family members in case planning and implementation. In addition to regularly involving family members as support systems for clients and families and to participate in case planning, counties intentionally contacted and kept in touch with teachers, coaches and community members who were able to support the family and maintain the child’s community. In addition, one county includes a section in court reports addressing the child’s key relationships, and another county encourages all family members to participate in therapy. Finally, one county uses relatives to supervise visitation in their homes.
- Two counties offered best practices regarding involvement of tribes as extended family. One county emphasized the importance of understanding the tribal cultural needs, values and available services in developing and implementing case plans, and another related the value of tribes in supporting the child and family.

**Challenges and Recommendations**

- Several counties noted that it takes time and extra effort to engage extended family members and that workers did not always have adequate time.
- Several counties which actively involved tribes also related challenges resulting from cultural differences.
- Very few recommendations were offered, other than encouraging greater involvement of extended family members.

Most Frequently Cited Strengths and Best Practices	
CWS	Probation
1. Relationships with management, supervisors and work team (72.9%)	1. Youth engagement (50%) Parent engagement (50%)
2. Parent engagement (64.6%)	2. Relationships with management, supervisors and work team (39.5%)
3. Collaboration with community partners and providers (45.8%)	3. Appropriate placement matches (28.9%)
4. Interagency collaboration (43.8%)	4. Employee Skills (21.1%)
5. Employee skills (35.4%)	

**Most Frequently Cited Recommendations**

**CWS**

1. Reduce workload/caseloads (56.3%)
2. Increase clerical and support staff (47.9%)
3. Recruit, retain staff (45.8%)
4. Increase Medi-Cal mental health services (37.5%)
5. Increase transportation and visitation services (35.7%)  
Improve relationships with the court (35.7%)

**Probation**

1. Reduce workload/caseloads (36.8%)
2. Appropriate Placement Matches (23.7%)  
Medi-Cal Mental Health (23.7%)  
Increase services for transportation and visitation (23.7%)
3. Improve procedures (21.1%)
4. Recruit/retain staff (21.1%)

**Most Frequently Cited Challenges**

**CWS**

1. Inadequate transportation and visitation services (52.1%)  
Relationship with the courts (52.1%)
2. Workload and caseloads (50.0%)  
Inadequate alcohol and drug treatment (50.0%)
3. Inadequate clerical and support services (47.9%)  
Inadequate Medi-Cal mental health services (47.9%)

**Probation**

1. Workload and caseloads (55.3%)
2. Inadequate visitation and transportation services (42.1%)
3. Parent Engagement (39.8%)
4. Inadequate Medi-Cal mental health services (34.2%)
5. Appropriate placement matches (31.6%)

## C. Service Array and Resource Development

This broad systemic factor includes three major components: (1) access to array of services, (2) staffing issues and (3) internal relationships and procedures.

Access to an Array of Services was a significant issue in virtually all PQCRs.

Strengths and Challenges:

- Although a few county-specific services were identified as strengths, most discussion centered around the lack of specific services. The table below identifies the services which counties identified as inadequate to address the needs of families.

**Table 7**  
**Access to and Array of Services**

Services Described as Inadequate	CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
Transportation or visitation services	25	52.1	16	42.1
Mental health services (Medi-Cal)	23	47.9	13	34.2
Alcohol and Drug Treatment for Adults and Youth	24	50.0	5	13.2
Housing	12	25.0	5	13.2
Parenting classes	11	22.9	1	2.6
Domestic Violence	6	12.5	0	0
Preventive Services	6	12.5	0	0
Aftercare Services	7	14.6	6	15.8

- Other service needs identified by PQCRs included job training, child care and after-school programs.
- Additional service-related challenges included an overall lack of services in rural areas, identified in 22 (45.8%) CWS reports and 10 (26.3%) probation reports, and inadequate bilingual or culturally competent services, identified in 21 (43.8%) CWS reports and 4 (10.5%) probation reports.
- A recurring theme in the PQCR reports was the need for and use of community resource guides to identify services for probation and CWS clients. A few counties reported that they had developed on-line or hard-cover guides to services and resources within their communities, and that these guides were very useful.

Recommendations

- Recommendations centered primarily around increasing services in the areas identified above. Several counties recommended building community collaboratives to provide services.
- Eight (16.7%) CWS and four (10.5%) probation reports made recommendation to address challenges in locating appropriate services for their clients either within or outside of their communities. Most recommended developing resource guides.

Staffing Issues were extremely critical to PQCR interviewees. They include the interwoven issues of overall workload, including documentation; caseload size and difficulty; turnover, recruitment and retention; and use of clerical and paraprofessional staff. A separate but related issue involves the employment of bilingual and bicultural staff. Overall, challenges and recommendations regarding staffing heavily outweighed the strengths.

Table 8 Staffing: Workload/Caseload								
	Workload/ Caseload				Staff Turnover, Recruitment & Retention			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
<b>Frequency</b>								
<b>Strengths</b>	7	14.6%	6	15.8%	1	2.1%	0	0.0%
<b>Challenges</b>	24	50.0%	21	55.3%	20	41.7%	7	18.4%
<b>Recommendations</b>	27	56.3%	14	36.8%	22	45.8%	8	21.1%

Table 9 Staffing: Clerical and Support staff, Bilingual/Bicultural Staff								
	Clerical and other support staff				Bilingual/ Bicultural Staff			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
<b>Frequency</b>								
<b>Strengths</b>	6	12.5%	3	7.9%	4	8.3%	1	2.6%
<b>Challenges</b>	23	47.9%	9	23.7%	12	25.0%	7	18.4%
<b>Recommendations</b>	23	47.9%	7	18.4%	10	20.8%	4	10.5%

### a. Workload and Caseloads

#### Strengths and Best Practices

- Low or “manageable” caseloads and workloads were cited as strengths or best practices by 7 small counties for CWS cases and by five small and one large county for probation cases. These workers generally carried fewer than 15 to 20 cases. (Only one county had low caseloads for both probation and CWS staff.) Staff and supervisors in these counties noted that lower caseloads

enabled them to spend more time with families, and to accomplish their work more effectively

#### Challenges

- Probation officers in 21 counties (55.3%) regarded their overall workload as a challenge, but made relatively few recommendations. Most interviewees regarded their workloads as overly heavy and burdensome, particularly due to “excessive paperwork” and ever-increasing requirements for documentation.
- CWS social workers linked heavy workloads and documentation requirements to reduced time with children and families. Other factors ascribed to burdensome or increased workload include high caseloads and staff turnover (see below) as well as implementation of time-consuming new initiatives such as Structured Decision Making, Team Decision Making and Differential Response.
- Half of all counties reported that caseloads of up to 35 or 40 cases per CWS worker posed significant challenges. Both probation and CWS staff reported high levels of stress and inadequate time to complete all of their duties and still have time to spend with children and families.

#### Recommendations

- Ten PQCR reports recommended reducing overall workloads by using clerical staff to handle data entry or reducing caseloads.
- The most frequent recommendations were to lower caseloads and hire additional staff. Methods to implement the recommendation included reviewing caseloads and assignments to redistribute and equalize more difficult cases among staff; using paraprofessional and clerical staff to handle duties not required to be handled by social workers; reviewing case transfer procedures; and using multi-disciplinary teams.

#### **b. Staff Turnover, Recruitment and Retention**

Counties recognized that staff turnover, and difficulties with recruitment and retention contribute significantly to the challenges of burdensome workloads and high caseloads.

#### Strengths and Best Practices

- One county noted staff recruitment for CWS as a strength but suggested no best practice; no county reported a strengths or best practices for probation.

#### Challenges

- Twenty (41.7%) and seven (18.4%) counties, respectively, reported challenges in staff turnover, recruitment and retention for CWS and probation. Small counties noted that it was difficult to recruit qualified workers to rural areas, where compensation is relatively low. Moreover, they found significantly difficulty in retaining supervisory and management staff, who frequently move to larger counties after a short time. Larger counties, while drawing from a larger pool of potential staff, reported high turnover due to stress, high and difficult caseloads, and inability to lower caseloads due to county policies or restrictive budgets.

## Recommendations

- Other than general recommendations from 22 (45.8%) counties to hire and retain more social workers and from 8 (21.1%) counties to hire more probation officers, there were relatively few suggestions regarding how to accomplish the goals. Recommendations included establishing staff teams, using experienced staff to work as mentors with new staff, and additional state funding for staff.

### **c. Use of Clerical and Paraprofessional Staff**

#### Strengths and Best Practices

- Although only six (12.5%) and three (7.9%) counties cited strengths and best practices for CWS and probation clerical and paraprofessional staff respectively, they included: adequate clerical support; assignment of clerical staff to handle case documentation filing and CWS/CMS data entry; use of paraprofessional staff as prevention/early intervention workers, parent partners/parent advocates, visitation supervisors and as aides supporting implementation of the case plan through community services.

#### Challenges

- Twenty-three counties (47.9%) reported CWS, and nine counties (23.7%) reported probation challenges with clerical and paraprofessional staffing. Challenges included overall lack of clerical assistance, as well as out-dated clerical procedures which hamper work flow. In addition, counties noted inadequate support for tasks including finding relative placements, supervising visitation, providing transportation to visitation or services, and finding services out of the county

#### Recommendations

- Twenty-three counties (47.9%) offered CWS recommendations, and seven counties (18.4%) offered probation recommendations for more effective use of clerical and paraprofessional staff for child welfare and probation services.
- The most frequent recommendation was to increase clerical support to CWS and probation units. Other recommendations include re-defining the roles of clerical and paraprofessional staff, and using or hiring support staff to provide the following functions:
  - Parent partners/advocates
  - Relative assessment
  - Referrals to services
  - Requests for travel and medication, transportation
  - Supervising parent/sibling visits
  - Obtaining information on services, especially out of county
  - Coordinating services provided to children and families
  - Serving as education, eligibility, foster family agency liaison
  - Coordinating group home referrals
  - Making packets for probation families
  - Support documentation of children's health and education.

**d. Bilingual and Bicultural Staff**

Strengths and Best Practices

- County CWS and probation departments found that bilingual and bicultural staff worked more effectively with county residents who speak limited or no English.

Challenges and Recommendations

- Twelve counties (25%) reported difficulty in recruiting and hiring bilingual staff as social workers, probation officers, translators or paraprofessional staff;
- Ten counties (20.8%) recommended hiring additional staff to work with residents with little or no English. Other recommendations included developing additional written materials in Spanish and other languages.

Internal Relationships and Procedures

This category captures general information on relationships. Specific information was compiled on areas frequently noted in PQCR reports, including staff skills and knowledge, strength-based approaches, relationships with supervisors and work teams, and management support.

**Table 10  
Administration and Internal Relationships**

	Employee Skills				Strengths-Based Approach				Relationships - Work Team, Management and Supervisors			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
<b>Strengths</b>	17	35.4%	8	21.1%	15	31.3%	4	10.5%	35	72.9%	15	39.5%
<b>Challenges</b>	1	2.1%	0	0.0%	1	2.1%	0	0.0%	20	41.7%	3	7.9%
<b>Recommendation</b>	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	6.3%	0	0.0%	21	43.8%	1	2.6%

**a. Staff Skills and Knowledge**

Strengths and Best Practices

- CWS staff in 17 counties (35.4%) and probation staff in 8 counties (21.1%) were described as displaying high levels of staff skill and professionalism.

Challenges and Recommendations

- Only one county report described staff skills as a challenge.
- There were no recommendations.

**b. Strengths-Based Approach**

**Strengths and Best Practices**

- CWS staff in 15 (31.3%) counties and probation staff in 4 (10.5%) counties viewed a strengths-based approach to their work with children, youth and families as a best practice.

**Challenges and Recommendations**

- Only one county report described a lack of a strengths-based approach as a challenge.
- There were no recommendations.

**c. Relationships with Management, Supervisors and Work Team**

**Strengths and Best Practices**

- Internal relationships had the second highest frequency among all the strengths and best practices noted in the PQCR reports. CWS staff in 35 (72.9%) counties and probation staff in 15 (39.5%) counties described internal relationships within their work units as positive. Specific best practices included team or joint responsibility for cases, as well as supervisors who worked cooperatively with their staff, were knowledgeable, assisted as needed and offered advice in sensitive situations. In addition, agency management who were engaged and supportive of child welfare and probation services was regarded as strong assets.

**Challenges**

- Relationships with supervisors and work teams also presented challenges to CWS staff. In 20 (41.7%) counties, interviewees noted difficulties with supervisory turnover, a few disengaged or overloaded supervisors, and an absence of teamwork within work unites.
- A few counties reported that agency managers who did not understand or fully support child welfare and probation services posed challenges in obtaining resources and implementing new strategies.

**Recommendations**

- Twenty-one (43.8%) counties offered CWS recommendations regarding internal relationships. Most recommended frequent and regular “staffings”, supervision or case conferences between supervisors and staff. Other recommendations focused on improving relationships among CWS units.

Table 10 Administration and Internal Relationships												
	Employee Skills				Strengths-Based Approach				Relationships - Work Team, Management and Supervisors			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
<b>Strengths</b>	17	35.4%	8	21.1%	15	31.3%	4	10.5%	35	72.9%	15	39.5%
<b>Challenges</b>	1	2.1%	0	0.0%	1	2.1%	0	0.0%	20	41.7%	3	7.9%
<b>Recommendation</b>	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	6.3%	0	0.0%	21	43.8%	1	2.6%

## D. Agency Responsiveness to the Community

Agency responsiveness explores relationships, partnerships and collaborations within and among other public and private agencies and organizations, including county agencies, public education, providers and community organizations. It also includes integrated services efforts such as multi-disciplinary collaborative teams.

**Table 11  
Collaboration and Partnerships**

	With Providers and Community Partners				Community Education & Involvement				Integrated services			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
<b>Strength</b>	22	45.8%	6	15.8%	6	12.5%	1	2.6%	12	25.0%	6	15.8%
<b>Challenge</b>	14	29.2%	3	7.9%	1	2.1%	0	0.0%	4	8.3%	0	0.0%
<b>Recommendation</b>	13	27.1%	6	15.8%	7	14.6%	2	5.3%	8	16.7%	3	7.9%

**Table 12  
Interagency Relationships**

	Interagency collaboration				Relationships between Probation and CWS			
	CWS		Prob.		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
<b>Strengths</b>	21	43.8%	6	15.8%	2	4.2%	3	7.9%
<b>Challenges</b>	8	16.7%	1	2.6%	1	2.1%	8	21.1%
<b>Recommendations</b>	12	25.0%	6	15.8%	4	8.3%	6	15.8%

### Collaboration with Providers and other Community Partners

#### Strengths and Best Practices

- Twenty-two (45.8%) CWS reports and six (15.8%) probation reports described strengths and best practices involved with community collaborations. Several small counties indicated that the size of the community built close relationships, noting that everyone in the county knows everybody else. Best practices included:

- Including community partners in developing and implementing new initiatives in the county, such as differential response, increasing mental health services, and Family to Family initiatives, including Team Decision-Making and caregiver recruitment.
- Partnering with community agencies to obtain grant funding from foundations.
- Participation of community partners and representatives in development of case plans, Independent Living Plans, Family Group Decision-Making, TDMs, family team meetings, etc.
- Forming public-private collaboratives to handle adoption services.
- Participating in community-wide collaboratives and forums to share information and best practices, and to advocate for children and families.
- Jointly developing and convening training sessions for CWS, Probation and community partner staff; participating in community leadership programs.
- Gaining support from providers to initiate programs such as Parent Child Interactive Training or dependent drug courts, because providers believe such efforts support their own work.
- Developing a mental health triage center with community partners.
- Working closely with partners to provide parent partners/parent mentors, voluntary family maintenance services and aftercare services.
- Serving on tribal committees to build support and rapport with local tribes.
- Partnering with a local university to expand mental health services.

#### Challenges

- Collaboration and contracts with community partners do not come without challenges, as noted by 14 (29.2%) CWS and 3 (7.9%) probation reports. In addition to noting inadequate collaboration within their counties, social workers and probation officers listed the following challenges:
  - Community partners often come with their own agendas, which may not align with CWS or probation priorities.
  - Collaboration takes a significant amount of time and many meetings, and may not quickly result in success.
  - Providers are not always held accountable for services provided to CWS and probation clients; moreover, they do not always provide high-quality services or timely reports.
  - Some county probation and CWS agencies do not have a strong history of working well with community partners; it is difficult and takes time to rebuild relationships.
  - Communication with community partners may be difficult.

#### Recommendations

- Recommendations primarily included increasing collaborative practices.

## Interagency Collaboration and Integrated Services

### Strengths and Best Practices

- Both CWS and Probation identified interagency collaboration as strengths and best practices. Many said that it is in the best interest of agencies with shared clients to jointly commit resources and work together to serve the clients. Best practices ranged widely from county systems of care encompassing many traditionally separate functions to multi-disciplinary teams and wraparound services. In addition to many of the best practices listed above for collaborations with community partners and providers, counties described the following best interagency practices.
  - braiding funding from multiple agency funding streams to fund interagency services
  - co-locating services in neighborhoods or communities where clients live
  - developing multi-disciplinary teams to provide child welfare, mental health, foster youth and probation placement services
  - wraparound services involving multi-disciplinary teams, to provide intensive services to families
  - developing joint operating procedures when agencies or multi-disciplinary teams work together

### Challenges and Recommendations

- Challenges include those listed for collaboration with community partners. In addition, counties described competition among public agencies for funding, and different agendas and funding priorities
- Recommendations were to increase interagency collaboration.

## Relationships between Probation and Child Welfare Services

### Strengths and Best Practices

- While many county reports noted the value of probation officers and CWS social worker collaboration, few best practices were identified, other than joint training.

### Challenges

- Eight probation reports (21.1%) listed challenges to improving relationships between CWS and probation, which included:
  - Inadequate information sharing between the departments.
  - Although probation must operate under IVE regulations, they do not fit probation well, as they were designed for child welfare services.
  - Probation generally serves a different population than child welfare services.
  - The focus of attention, and therefore services, types of placement and approaches are different for probation. In CWS, usually the parent must change to reunite with the child, while in probation, the child's behavior

- must change. Probation frequently deals with much more highly restrictive placement.
- When there is dual jurisdiction, there may be lack of service coordination between CWS and probation.
- In many counties, probation has many fewer resources than CWS, ranging from opportunities for training to inadequate case management processes.

Recommendations

- Recommendations focused on building greater understanding of each agencies culture, strengths and weaknesses, receiving joint and cross-training, and then working together to support all children in care.

Community Education and Involvement

Strengths, Best Practices and Recommendations

- Strengths, best practices and recommendations centered on increasing public awareness and appreciation for child welfare and probation services. Several counties have developed ‘academies’ where the public is invited to several sessions where the child welfare system is explained. Other counties have publicized needs for foster parents, or featured children who need foster homes. Still others publish newspaper articles or participate in radio or TV broadcasts to describe the objectives, values and needs of child welfare services. Recommendations focused on increasing such efforts.

Relationships with the Court

In their PQCR reports, counties discussed three separate issues related to how CWS and probation work with the court—overall relationships and mutual respect, consistency of standards between state or county policy and court rulings, and representation of CWS or probation in court.

<b>Table 13 Court Processes and Relationships</b>				
	<b>CWS</b>		<b>Probation</b>	
	<b># of counties</b>	<b>% of counties</b>	<b># of counties</b>	<b>% of counties</b>
<b>Frequency</b>				
<b>Strengths</b>	7	14.6%	3	7.9%
<b>Challenges</b>	25	29.2%	2	2.6%
<b>Recommendations</b>	17	27.1%	3	7.9%

#### Strengths and Best Practices

- Seven (14.6%) CWS reports and three (7.9%) probation reports described strengths and best practices regarding their relationship with the courts and county counsel. These counties remarked that the court was supportive of their work, communicated regularly with probation and CWS, and had judges who were strong advocates for children. Drug court was singled out as a best practice by at least five counties.

#### Challenges and Recommendations

- Challenges or recommendations addressing specific challenges were raised in more than 25 (52.1%) CWS county reports, but only three probation reports. Most challenges concerned poor relationships between CWS and the court and/or county counsel, resulting in adversarial relationships, poor credibility with the court and high levels of stress. Specific issues included frequent conflict between social worker recommendations and court decisions, the perception that the court was using different standards than CWS in its rulings, poor representation of CWS by county counsel, court delays, the number of continuances granted by courts, and a lack of consistency between judges.
- Most recommendations addressed building better relationships between CWS, the courts and county counsel through regular meetings, team collaboration, facilitated meetings, and better, more frequent communication. One county recommended working with the court to develop a more flexible process to amend case plans, and another recommended that social workers not be required to present all cases in court.

## E. Foster and Adoptive Home Licensing, Approval and Recruitment, Placement and Support of Caregivers

County CWS and probation staff offered best practices, challenges and recommendations on the supply of foster homes, group homes and specialized facilities within the community; finding appropriate placements, including relative caregivers, for children; caregiver relationships with county staff and the families of children in their care; and resources allocated to caregivers.

Table 14 Out of Home Placement												
	Supply of Local Foster Homes				Supply of Group Homes/ Specialized Treatment				Finding Appropriate Placements			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
<b>Strengths</b>	2	4.2%	2	5.3%	0	0.0%	2	5.3%	12	25.0%	11	28.9%
<b>Challenges</b>	16	33.3%	4	10.5%	7	14.6%	8	21.1%	12	25.0%	12	31.6%
<b>Recommendations</b>	13	27.1%	2	5.3%	6	12.5%	7	18.4%	14	29.2%	9	23.7%

Table 15 Caregiver Relationships and Resources								
	Relationships with Caregivers				Resources for Caregivers			
	CWS		Probation		CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
<b>Frequency</b>								
<b>Strengths</b>	9	18.8%	5	13.2%	3	6.3%	1	2.6%
<b>Challenges</b>	7	14.6%	5	13.2%	3	6.3%	0	0.0%
<b>Recommendations</b>	5	10.4%	4	10.5%	6	12.5%	1	2.6%

## Supply of Out-of-Home Placements for Children With-in Their Communities

### Foster Homes and Group Homes/Specialized Facilities

#### Strengths and Best Practices

- Very few counties reported strengths in the supply of local foster homes too very small, remote counties reported that the county offered very good foster homes where children could retain family and community ties or transition from group homes to reunification with their families. Two other counties also reported a commitment to keeping children within the county.
- Only two large, Southern California counties reported that the availability of group homes with specialized services for children in probation care. In one county, group homes offer individual, family and group therapy, independent living services, transitional housing and educational services. In the second county, specialized homes offer services for youth sex offenders and youth needing drug treatment.

#### Challenges and Recommendations

- In contrast, sixteen (33.3%) of county CWS reports, and four (10.5%) of probation reports reported that the supply of in-county foster and adoptive homes was inadequate, and many children had to be placed outside of their home county.
- The supply of in-county group homes, including those with specialized services was also reported to be inadequate. CWS staff in seven counties (14.6%) and probation staff in eight counties (21.1%) reported that there were too few local group homes to serve the county's children. Specialized programs for sex offenders were noted to be especially inadequate.
- Recommendations focused on recruiting additional foster and group homes, including those offering therapeutic services, or those for medically fragile, sibling sets, older children and non-English speakers.

## Finding Appropriate Placements

Finding appropriate out-of-home placements with relatives, non-related extended family members, or in foster or group homes can avoid "blown" placements and result in greater stability for children in care.

#### Strengths and Best Practices

- Twelve (25.0%) of CWS reports and 11 (28.9%) of probation reports cited strengths and best practices in the art of matching children with out-of home care. They included:
  - Emphasizing relative and non-related extended family member (NREFM) placements, by teaching workers techniques for identifying relatives and NREFM and providing the tools needed to secure the placements.
  - Working to find placements that will take siblings
  - Using a specialized permanency unit to seek appropriate matches

- Using Placement councils or Team Decision Making to work with families to identify appropriate placements
- Identifying providers with appropriate cultural and language backgrounds

#### Challenges

- Challenges to identifying appropriate placements, identified by 12 (25%) CWS reports and 12 (31.6%) probation reports related to difficulties and time needed to identify and secure relative and NREFM placements, the lack of providers who can offer cultural and language matches, difficulty in finding any local care, and challenges with finding specialized care for siblings, older children and children with special needs.

#### Recommendations

- Recommendations offered by 14 CWS reports (29.2%) and 9 probation reports (24%) included establishing protocols to develop appropriate placements, reviewing existing placement practices, and exploring how to better make placement matches.

### Caregiver Relationships with County Staff and Families

#### Strengths, Best Practices and Recommendations

- Nine (14.6%) of CWS and 5 (13.2%) probation reports identified best practices and corresponding recommendations to establish or improve relationships between caregivers, county staff and families. They include including caregivers as part of the team to develop and implement case plans. In these counties, the opinions and advice of caregivers are sought and attended. Another best practice is to ask selected caregivers to work with and mentor the child's biological parent, teaching the parent good parenting and relationship skills. A third is to use skilled caregivers to monitor parent visits.

#### Challenges

- Relationship challenges identified by 7 (14.6%) CWS and 5 (13.2%) probation reports included caregivers' perceptions that they were not valued by social workers or probation officers. Some reports noted that social workers did not always respond to telephone calls, service requests or other urgent caregiver needs. A few counties reported that some caregivers show bias against birth families, and work to stymie case plans and reunification.

### Caregiver Support and Resources

#### Recommendations

- Several CWS reports recommended finding ways to better support caregivers, including respite care or increasing reimbursement

## F. Staff and Provider Training

The table below lists training needs identified in the PQCR reports. The greatest training needs cited for both CWS and probation is orientation, core training, practice guidelines and case management. Other training needs cited by at least 25% of CWS reports include child and family engagement, caregiver training, cross-training with other CWS units, probation, county departments or providers; Structured decision-making, supervisory and leadership training for supervisors and managers, and additional training in addressing substance abuse, mental health and domestic violence issues. Additional high-priority training needs for probation included identifying appropriate placements and child and family engagement.

**Table 16**  
**Staff and Provider Training**

Training Needs	CWS		Probation	
	# of counties	% of counties	# of counties	% of counties
Social worker orientation/core training/practice guidelines	26	54.1	3	7.9
Child and family engagement	22	45.8	10	26.3
Training for caregivers	16	33.3	5	13.1
Cross training with other CWS units/county departments/probation/providers	13	27.1	2	5.3
Structured Decision-Making	12	25.0	3	7.9
CWS Supervision and Leadership Training	12	25.0	2	5.3
Training in substance abuse, mental health or domestic violence issues	12	25.0	1	2.6
Cultural competency training	11	22.9	5	13.1
CWS/CMS	11	22.9	4	10.5
Training for court staff	10	20.8	7	18.4
Use of training mentors	9	18.7	3	7.9
Probation officer orientation/core training/practice guidelines/case management	5	10.4	25	65.8
Identifying appropriate placements, including with relatives and NREFMs	3	6.2	12	31.6
Probation Supervision and Leadership Training	0	0	2	5.3

## G. Recommendations for State Policy Change

Counties identified three major areas of recommendation for state policy change.

1. Timeframes for reunification. Eight CWS reports (16.7%) and four probation reports (10.5%) recommended that the state re-examine required timeframes for reunification. They reported that current timeframes are too short to allow parents to obtain adequate treatment necessary to sustain recovery from substance abuse so that they can re-unify with their children.
2. Case Management Systems. Eleven probation reports (28.9%) noted challenges with inadequate systems for case management and called for the state to either establish a case management system specifically for probation, or to adapt the CWS/CMS system so that it can be used by probation. In addition, four CWS reports recommended that the state make improvements to the CWS/CSM system.
3. Flexible Funding. Eight CWS reports (16.7%) and 3 probation reports (7.9%) requested either additional funding to serve children in their systems, or more flexibility in how they can use existing funding.

## **Section IV Assessment of the PQCR Process**

This section provides a summary of interviews intended to provide qualitative information on the effectiveness of the Peer Quality Case Review process in California. To gather data, an on-site group interview was conducted with CDSS staff assigned to counties as consultants and advisors on the PQCR process. Telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of the central and southern Regional Training Academies (RTA), who facilitated key components of the PQCR process in many California counties. (A representative from the Northern Training Academy was unable to participate.) In addition, the child welfare services and probation managers responsible for the PQCR in Los Angeles, Monterey and San Joaquin counties, as well as the child welfare services manager in Humboldt County were interviewed by telephone. (The Humboldt County probation manager left the department and was unavailable.). The interview protocol (see Appendix) was provided prior to each telephone interview.

Interviewees were asked to describe the strengths and challenges of each of the key elements of the PQCR process and to offer recommendations to improve the process. Their responses to these and concluding global questions regarding the overall effectiveness of and challenges to the PQCR process are provided below. Statistical data is not provided, as the sample of counties was small and not representative of the state.

### **The PQCR Planning Process**

Interviewees commented about the overall planning process, the composition and roles of the county planning committee, and fiscal issues.

#### Planning Process

Three counties involved in the interviews conducted single-county planning processes, while one participated in a tri-county planning process. Regardless of the type of process, most respondents noted that the process was very time-consuming, but effective; they reported needing at least six months to plan and implement PQCRs. Several interviewees stressed the importance of observing or participating in another county's PQCR before starting their own planning process. Most respondents felt that the PQCR guide was useful, although some CDSS consultants felt that the Guide did not provide adequate direction and guidance in some areas. Both RTA and CDSS respondents recommended updating and revising the Guide based on what has been learned in the first round of PQCRs. The weekly conference calls among counties implementing PQCRs elicited mixed responses; some respondents, especially those in rural areas, found them useful, while others did not. CDSS consultants noted that they found the minutes of the conference calls, which identified specific tasks, to be very helpful. Several respondents noted that state procedures and requirements changed partway through the PQCR process, causing difficulties for the counties.

### Planning Committee Composition and Roles

Overall, most respondents reported positively on the composition and involvement of the county PQCR teams, noting that the teams worked well together and all contributed to completing all the planning tasks.

The joint involvement of both probation and child welfare service staff in the PQCR elicited many comments. Overall, most respondents agreed that the experience set up common understanding and established good relationships between probation and child welfare services. Several respondents, however, noted that it was difficult to collaborate because of the separate cultures, issues, regulations and terminology of the two agencies, as well as the lack of a common data base or case management system. One county CWS manager recommended separating the CWS and probation PQCRs, and an RTA representative commented that the child welfare focus of the PQCR process did not “honor” probation. A probation manager recommended providing probation with a stronger orientation to the child welfare system, the Self Assessment and the System Improvement Plan, and a state representative recommended that probation representatives orient CDSS staff on their own system.

Most counties valued the assistance of both the RTA representative and their CDSS consultant, and reported that the partnership generally worked well. Early and consistent involvement of both representatives was stressed. Respondents noted, however, that in some counties there was inadequate clarity about roles and decision-making authority among the counties, RTA and CDSS consultants. In two counties, turnover among CDSS consultants resulted in confusion and planning delays.

Other comments on committee composition included the importance of including the “right people” who had experience with the issues explored in the PQCR, as well as management involvement and commitment. Assistance with the myriad details of PQCR implementation from staff analysts and support staff was valued and recommended. One respondent noted the value of including all committee members from the very beginning of the process.

### Fiscal Issues

Most counties noted difficulties with the allocation of funding for the PQCR. Many were unclear on the extent of funding available for the process, the division of funds between child welfare services and probation, and state and county restrictions on use of the funds. Several counties related difficulties related to reimbursing peer county panelists for dinners and hotel accommodations.

### Selection of Focus Area, Cases and Interviewees, Interview Tools and Interview Panels

Major activities included in the planning process were selection of focus area, identifying appropriate cases and interviewees, developing interview and other tools, and selecting interview panels.

### Focus Area

While some counties were clear from the start about their PQCR focus area, others had difficulty selecting a focus area. Strengths in focus area selection included outcome data and supportive assistance provided by CDSS, brainstorming activities provided by RTA staff, the availability of data provided by the Safe Measures software, and clarity about county needs and outcomes.

Some counties struggled to identify focus areas and supporting data applicable and useful to both child welfare services and probation; these difficulties resulted in a shared focus area in some counties and different focus areas in others. Other counties initially selected very broad or multiple focus areas, and then had difficulty finding documentation, designing interview tools, and eliciting specific and cogent information. Another challenge stemmed from a lack of clarity or what the counties perceived as a “change in the state rules” regarding selection of focus areas. Several counties reported that they were asked to change the focus area they had already selected because the state required them to focus on Safety outcomes. On the other hand, CDSS consultants reported that some counties initially inappropriately selected focus areas that were not directly related to key outcomes included in their self-assessment and system improvement plan.

Recommendations to improve focus area selections included close consultation with CDSS from the beginning, better education and clarity on state guidelines for selecting focus areas, and strong communication between child welfare service and probation about system and county needs. Several respondents also strongly recommended keeping the focus area simple and uncluttered to ensure that specific and useful data is elicited during the interviews.

#### Selection of Cases and Interviewees

While counties were generally pleased with the cases and interviewees they eventually selected, many found the process difficult and time-consuming, and more of an art than a science. Los Angeles, the only large county interviewed, was able to draw a random sample from its large, sophisticated data base. Smaller counties, with smaller caseloads and fewer MIS resources, used other techniques. These counties generally established their criteria, and then used a combination of lists of appropriate cases provided by the state, their own data systems, Safe Measures and individual staff expertise to identify cases that met the criteria. With limited data systems, probation cases were almost always selected by experienced and knowledgeable probation officers. State assistance in providing lists and documentation of appropriate cases was appreciated.

Once potential cases were identified, smaller counties typically found it difficult to identify the specific cases to use in the PQCR; many noted that selection of cases and selection of interviewees were inextricably linked. Most counties wanted to contrast successful and unsuccessful cases, and interview a probation officer or social worker who knew the case well. They also did not want to interview the same worker multiple times. Difficulties arose because many workers who knew the selected cases were no longer with the department or unit, the case had been transferred multiple times, or the case was too old and practices had subsequently changed. One interview respondent noted that flexibility, creativity and a group of very knowledgeable people were necessary to balance appropriate cases and interviewees. Counties reached various solutions; in some counties, more than one worker, or a worker and a supervisor were interviewed for a specific case; in other counties, social workers and probation officers were interviewed multiple times. Another county used practice interviews to further narrow case selection. In virtually every county interviewed, case selection took considerably longer than anticipated. Other challenges included asking staff to prepare case summaries; one respondent reported that staff declared, “It’s all in my head.”

Respondents strongly recommended starting the case selection process early. They also recommended flexibility and creativity, using state assistance, relying upon

knowledgeable staff to select cases and interviewees, and pulling a few back-up cases if interviews have to be cancelled. One respondent also recommended having a contingency “Plan B.” A final recommendation was to provide training to the interviewees before PQCR week.

#### Developing Interview, Focus Group and De-brief Tools

Almost every respondent reported favorably on the development and use of interview, focus group and de-brief tools. They noted that the State or RTA provision of interview and other tools previously developed by other counties was extremely helpful. CDSS, RTA and county respondents also agreed that CDSS and RTA assistance, training and collaborative relationships were very helpful to counties in reviewing and adapting the tools. They also strongly endorsed testing the tools in mock interviews with knowledgeable staff, and then refining them.

The development and use of the tools also presented challenges. RTA and county representatives noted that developing individual and focus group questions that elicit good information is difficult and time-consuming. They remarked that “less is more” in interview protocols. Several county respondents agreed, stating that their interview tools were too long, included broad questions that were not specific or relevant to their focus area, or redundant. One noted that the timing of questions did not work. Respondents from all groups reported that they had not adequately tested the tools with staff interviewees, or had run out of time. Focus group tools also presented challenges; one county noted the large amount of time required to develop and test tools for nine separate focus groups. Other challenges noted by respondents included using de-briefing tools that were not well-coordinated with the interview tools, summary matrix and PQCR report, and the lack of standardized case review tools. One county also reported resistance of staff to assisting with the PQCR process.

Recommendations for the development and use of tools included shortening and condensing interview tools to a few key, in-depth questions on a few topics; early and mandatory testing, standardization of tools by focus area, inclusion of case review tools for every case, and better assistance and communication with CDSS consultants.

#### Selection of PQCR Panelists

Overall, respondents were very satisfied with their panels of interviewers. All four of the counties interviewed used peer interviewers from other counties; one also used community partners, including a tribal representative. One county participating in a tri-county PQCR process used interviewers from their partnering agencies. County respondents reported that they had looked for peer representatives from similar or neighboring counties, those with similar focus areas or upcoming PQCRs or with whom they had existing relationships. They also looked for diversity among panelists. All county respondents noted that most panelists were hard-working, cooperative and enthusiastic. One county reported that the tribal representative and community partner provided diverse and very useful perspectives. Based on their experience with a wider array of counties, CDSS and RTA representatives endorsed mixed and diverse teams of probation and child welfare services staff and community partners.

Challenges included the logistics of bringing people to remote, rural counties, difficulties in confirming participation for some peer county representatives, and ensuring that

teams had an appropriate mix of personalities and experience. A few county respondents and RTA representatives noted that some panelists were overly judgmental and conveyed their own agendas to the process. Respondents also noted that teams interviewing both social workers and probation staff had to be trained to use more than one interview tool, and did not always have adequate knowledge of the probation system.

Recommendations included establishing criteria for interview panel members during the planning process, developing statewide guidelines for interviewers, and providing consistent training by Regional Training Academies. Other suggestions included starting early to recruit appropriate panelists, seeking diverse panelists from education, the courts, mental health, tribes, providers, etc, and developing statewide or regional lists of interested participants. Probation respondents recommended including more team members with knowledge of the probation and placement systems.

### **Implementing the Process: PQCR Week**

CDSS staff, Regional Training Academy representatives and county CWS and probation managers were interviewed regarding the strengths, challenges and their recommendations of the PQCR interview process, focus groups, de-briefing sessions and data recording.

#### Interview Process

Overall, county PQCR managers were pleased with their PQCR Week. Several cited preparation of interviewees before PQCR as a strength, including plenty of overall staff education about PQCRs, especially emphasizing that the PQCR was not an audit. They also endorsed training interviewees ahead of time, and providing them with interview schedules and interview questions so that they could prepare for and be comfortable with the interviews. During PQCR week, they reported that careful planning had paid off, citing strengths in a variety of areas, including comfortable, centralized facilities (often a hotel) with separate interview rooms to ensure confidentiality; effective organization and interview timing of interviews; and a positive, cooperative, non-punitive, even fun approach to the interviews. One respondent noted that initially resistant employees became cooperative and enthusiastic.

RTA and CDSS staff reported that overall preparation was strong and participant feedback favorable. Strengths focused on training and orientation for PQCR panelists and staff. They noted the importance of differentiating PQCRs from audits, and emphasizing how team members have different roles but must work together to elicit good information and keep the interviews focused and on track. They reported that practice interviews were helpful in identifying and correcting potential problems. CDSS staff noted that staff assigned as greeters and runners were helpful in keeping the process moving.

Both CDSS and RTA staff emphasized the importance of the recorder in taking careful, accurate notes during the interview that can be easily transferred to the summary matrix. Both noted the importance of training the recorders.

County staff reported a variety of challenges encountered with a few individual panel members. Some panels and individuals had difficulty focusing on the specific case and focus area, and got wrapped up in stories unrelated to the focus area; others “identified too much” with the interviewees. In a few cases, teams inaccurately assumed trends. Overall, most noted that the work was exhausting, and by the end of the week, panelists were very tired. Challenges added by RTA and CDSS included dominant panelists, unprepared or late interviewees, lack of privacy for interviews, and recording that was difficult to put into the summary matrix

Recommendations included early and thorough preparation, effective training for both interviewees and panel members, more training for recorders, and greater emphasis on sticking to the focus area. One respondent recommended setting aside time for teams to share views and discuss how to work together. A county manager recommended carefully reviewing team composition and which worker is assigned to each team. Several respondents recommended assigning staff with laptops to record each interview de-brief in a format easily transferable to the summary matrix. Logistical recommendations included greater spacing of interviews, scheduling an extra day for make-up interviews or asking the interviewees to come earlier.

#### Focus Groups

All four counties interviewed conducted focus groups as part of their PQCR process; three were atypical of the state in conducting five to eight groups, significantly more than most counties. Separate focus groups were offered for social workers and probation officers, supervisors, biological parents, youth, community partners, and tribes. All groups of respondents noted that focus groups were an excellent way to reach large groups, and to receive client and community feedback. Overall, these counties reported that despite some logistical difficulties, they provided useful data that was generally (but not always) consistent with the staff interviews. County respondents noted that participants were engaged, and that some of the information was difficult to hear and painful. Logistical and procedural strengths included experienced, knowledgeable facilitators, and information provided ahead of time to participants. Counties also noted that the focus group questions were open-ended and clearly targeted to the focus area.

The primary challenge cited by all groups included attaining adequate attendance of the target group. The amount of time needed to prepare for the focus group, the cost of paying facilitators, and the need to provide child care, transportation and food also posed challenges.

All groups interviewed recommended including focus groups as a key component of PQCRs, and integrating their findings into the final de-briefing session. More specific recommendations included separating line and management staff in separate focus groups, ensuring child care, food and transportation are available; informing participants about incentives before the focus group, and spending adequate time to prepare youth participants.

#### Recording (Summary Matrix)

There was mixed response to the effectiveness of the data flow from the individual interviews to the summary matrix.-- with one huge exception: the electronic template—described by one respondent as a “monster” was corrupted and extremely difficult to use in many counties. Other than this technical problem, many respondents reported that

recording on the summary matrix went well; they felt that the headings were effective and the questions clear and concise.

Other respondents disagreed; they noted that the information from the interviews was often summarized and not accurately transferred to the matrix. Some also felt the format was difficult to use. Several reported that there was inadequate time to record the notes from the interview on the summary matrix. Other challenges included inadequate training of staff assigned to input data to the summary matrix, differences of opinion between CDSS and county staff regarding recording procedures; inadequate knowledge of CWS and probation terminology by recorders and concerns about maintaining confidentiality.

Recommendations including stationing a recorder with a laptop in each interview room to record the interview de-brief under appropriate headings, and then bring the data directly to the summary matrix recorder to transfer the data. Many respondents also recommended additional training for recorders to ensure consistency and clear transmission of data. Other recommendations were to replace bullets with more in-depth stories and descriptions of best practices; to assign the person who will write the report to enter the data into the summary matrix; to remove the CWS/CMS heading on the matrix and to permit the county to rent needed laptops, copiers and printers to facilitate the process.

#### De-briefing Session

The de-briefing session at the end of PQCR week is intended to bring all participants and county management together to hear reports from the interview panels and focus group facilitators, and to draw up conclusions and recommendations from the PQCR.

Overall, respondents found the session valuable to synthesize the information gathered during the week, and to inform both management and staff of the findings. The de-briefing also provides the opportunity for peer county staff to share practices that may be helpful to their host county. One county manager noted that the session re-affirmed what they already knew; another reported that it showed the community that the county was making a real effort to learn what was going on and what needed to change. The session, in fact, promoted immediate action for change in several counties. All groups emphasized the importance of including top management, although a few counties noted that their managers were uncomfortable with some of the information. Some respondents noted that they were able to provide an immediate initial report.

The de-briefing sessions, however, were not without challenges. The RTA representatives noted that the “three-word bullets” posted on the flip charts did not capture the depth of information, the stories or the specific findings of best practices. They also noted that PQCR participants are very tired by the final day, and the facilitator must make the information fresh and probing. CDSS consultants reported that the de-briefing sessions varied significantly around the state, and that there is often inadequate time scheduled to share information among peers or between probation and child welfare service staff. County staff stated that facilitation was critical (but not always effective) in maintaining a strength-based atmosphere which balances strengths and challenges. They were mixed about the value of input from other counties; some found it valuable, while others found it inappropriate and critical.

A variety of recommendations emerged from discussion of the de-briefing session. RTA representatives recommended that the facilitator and the process have the ability to capture the richness and depth of workers' stories; they recommended using trainers with PQCR experience who understand how the process has evolved. CDSS consultants recommended developing consistent guidelines for the de-briefing session, and giving CDSS the opportunity to explain next steps. Most respondents recommended inviting all participants and staff (some recommended mandatory attendance), while a few thought it would be more valuable to invite only key people.

Most respondents offered suggestions regarding the role of top management in the final de-brief. While there was general agreement they should attend, several recommended privately de-briefing the top managers before the general session so that they can be prepared for the information and formulate an initial response.

## **Reporting on the PQCR Process**

### PQCR Analysis and Report

Comments about the PQCR reports were mixed. CDSS staff observed that reports written in-house rather than contracted out were generally stronger, noting that some counties who contracted with a writer to prepare the report may be more "hands off" and not as accountable. One county noted that their contracted writer did not understand the political sensitivities of the county, and did not write from a strengths-based perspective. Another reported that the contractor was late, and wrote a brief, poor-quality report; next time they will write the report in-house.

Most, but not all found the timeframe and format reasonable and used models from other counties. Probation and CWS managers typically worked together to correct and edit the reports; some counties found this a positive process, while others found it divisive. Challenges noted by RTA staff included difficulty translating the bullets into in-depth recommendation.

Recommendations for the PQCR Report included convening a CDSS/county/RTA working group to develop better guidelines on report content, format, and inclusion of additional materials such as focus group data and copies of the tools. In addition guidelines are needed on how much information to include, and how to delineate priority strengths, best practices, challenges and recommendations.

Other county recommendations included writing the report as soon as possible after completion of the PQCR to capture all the data, and ensuring balance in the report between probation and CWS, and between strengths and challenges. Counties who were not satisfied with contracted reports recommended either writing the report in-house, being confident about the writer, or using an outside writer only to write a first draft.

Above all, said one respondent, it is critical stay involved and carry out the recommendations of the report.

## **Conclusions**

### Findings and Conclusions

At the conclusion of the interview, all respondents were asked two global questions: 1) Did the PQCR process work to affect change in child welfare and juvenile probation services? And, 2) What are the overall challenges to the process? The findings and conclusions listed below summarize their responses. The text which follows, paraphrases actual specific responses.

1. Overall, the PQCR process produced valuable information for county child welfare and probation agencies. They also served as a valuable tool for providing feedback from counties to the state.
2. Joint PQCRs for child welfare and probation staff, while problematic, were effective and built closer relationships among the two agencies. Several interviewees indicated that probation cases and needs seemed somewhat of an add-on to a process designed for child welfare cases. Some noted that panelists typically were not well-versed on probation policies and procedures, and recommended that either the processes be separated, or use interviewing teams with more probation representatives.

On the other hand, many respondents related the value of joint PQCRs; doing PQCRs together was not only more efficient, they built greater understanding of common issues and disparate cultures. Many interviewees indicated that additional time should be spent during the planning phase to understand the different cultures, goals, operational language (jargon) and capacities of the two agencies, so that the PQCRs can better reflect the needs and situations faced by both.

3. The PQCRs delineated areas where practice can be improved, and brought key issues to the attention of county top management. As a result, several interviewees indicated that changes to county policies and procedures were already being implemented.
4. The PQCRs provided a valuable means to listen directly to line staff to learn which practices work and don't work, and how they can be improved.
5. Many counties indicated that it takes at least six months to accomplish the planning process. Selecting cases and developing and testing interview and focus group tools generally took longer than anticipated.
6. PQCRs developed valuable peer relationships among counties. Respondents reported that peer county panelists frequently shared useful information and practices with host counties.
7. Counties that included community partners in the PQCR process, either as members of interview panels or as participants in focus groups, reported a greater degree of community buy-in and support of child welfare and probation staff.
8. The recording and reporting processes need improvement. Guidelines and procedures for the information flow between individual interviews to the summary

matrix to the de-brief to the county PQCR report should be strengthened and clarified.

9. County reports were highly variable in length and format. The state and counties might consider developing two report formats. The report to the state would include a highly prioritized list of strengths, challenges and recommended, and specify which practices seemed to be related to improved outcomes. The internal county report provide a more in-depth looks at specific practices, and include more stories and details on why practices work and how they are implemented.
10. The PQCR Guidelines should be revised and updated to include lessons learned during the first three-year cycle of PQCRs. Interviewees suggested that the revisions be guided by a work team including CDSS staff, the Regional Training Academies, and county child welfare and probation staff.

Did the process work? Will it change anything?

- PQCR brings issues to light, to the forefront, to the view of management.
- A great deal has been gained. Bringing CWS/PO cultures together was difficult but valuable. PQCR sets up common understanding among PO and CWS.
- It worked beyond my wildest dreams! We shortchange the folks on the line—this is the first process to give workers a voice. Amazing to hear what they have to say.
- PQCR allows trouble-shooting and provides a feedback mechanism. We need to let them know that they've been heard; what has changed is because we listened to workers.
- Staff and stakeholders found the same issues regarding timely reunification.
- People felt safe, strength-based in talking about strengths and weaknesses.
- The clear focus—what do we need to do? Are we already doing this?—leads to program directives.
- If it informs internal and community change, it will make a difference.
- Promoted community-building, exchange of information, partnering among counties.
- PQCR led to substantial community buy-in during SA and SIP; FRCs tribes involved, ideas incorporated into SIP; helped transparency, community system of care.
- It helps CDSS consultants understand what's going on in the counties so can provide TA.
- Our PQCR reinforced and aligned the 4E waiver process.
- Would like to do it annually, with focus areas in addition to safety. Hope to get to essence more than once every 3 years – non-judgmental consideration of best practice.
- Some things are already being implemented. Administrators saw what we do—we have already hired another officer.

- Appreciate state's involvement, muscle. Made probation get involved; shows probation placement is on the radar screen; the state focus has made it easier to get support.
- Process good, gave people a voice. Now management team must make changes, keep staff informed.

#### What are the Remaining Challenges?

- Combining probation and CWS has been difficult; they have different focuses for reunification, different populations and different issues.
- There needs to be more feedback from counties to state. Next time, the state should release a summary and highlights of the PQCR reports-- what did other counties learn, what are best practices statewide.
- Counties are still not moving fast enough—they need to plan ahead.
- We need more planning time for PQCR than 6 months; now the self-assessment is due!

**Appendix**  
Interview Tool– PQCR Interviews  
DSS Staff, Training Academy Staff, Counties

Name : \_\_\_\_\_

County: \_\_\_\_\_  
    \_\_\_CWS      \_\_\_Probation      Training Academy: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Element	a. What Worked?	b. Challenges/What Didn't Work?	c. Recommendations
1. <b>Planning Process</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Logistics</li><li>• Fiscal issues</li></ul>			
2. <b>Selection of Focus Area</b>			
3. <b>Case Selection</b>			
4. <b>Tools</b>			
5. <b>Selection of Panelists/ Teams</b>			
6. <b>Interview Process</b>			
7. <b>Focus Groups</b>			
8. <b>Final De-brief Session</b>			
9. <b>PQCR Recording (on summary matrix)</b>			
10. <b>PQCR Analysis, Report</b>			

**Overall Process**

**11. Did the process work? Will it change anything?**

**12. Overall Challenges**