

Introduction

Good afternoon. I'm Lori Jones, Director of the Alameda County Social Services Agency. Thank you Chairman Swanson and members of the committee for the opportunity to address this body and for bringing the disparities among Boys and Young Men of Color into a statewide conversation.

Agency Perspective- Who we are

As a Director, my commitment is to ensure:

- that our services have the broadest community appeal and impact on underserved populations;
- that we explore collaborative opportunities with public and private partners; and
- that we improve communication with stakeholders.

Social Services is the largest County agency providing safety net services **to over 250k clients per month.**

- For the month of December 2011 alone, we served over 64K boys and/or men of color (64,993).
- In just one of my programs, CalWORKs, there are approximately 12K (11,531) boys of color served.
- In fact, boys of color represent 69% of all boys living in CalWORKs households, and 37% of all children living in CalWORKs households.
- It should also be noted that the majority of these households are female headed.

My agency is the last resort for many boys of color and their families. In many cases we are the only thing standing between them and homelessness, hunger, abuse and neglect, and health care.

Program Perspective-Disincentives

Despite my passion for providing more comprehensive services to address the disparities impacting boys and men of color, the constraints of State and Federal legislation too often limit our range of options. The regulations governing social services programs can be counterintuitive to the core tenets of our mission; one of which is to strengthen and preserve families. This is sometimes difficult to achieve - particularly in the CalWORKs and CalFresh programs. There are other provisions of these programs that not only create a financial disincentive for families to stay together, but also exclude some individuals from receiving services to fulfill their basic needs, such as food and housing. For instance, certain drug felons cannot receive CalFresh (food stamps) nor can they reside in public housing due to their criminal history. And, the current CalWORKs grant amount is \$638/month for a family of 3 – this is equal to what the grant amounts were in the late 1980's!

In another of my Agency's program areas, the child welfare program, boys of color represent 78% of all boys in foster care while they are only 32% of boys in the general population in Alameda County. Despite earnest efforts to date, we still need systemic changes to impact the over representation of boys of color in foster care. As a result of early intervention and prevention programs where we have redirected financial resources to provide services to at-risk families, we have seen a 61% decline in the foster care caseload since 2002. We have been

able to do this in part using the Title IV-E Waiver, which allows the flexible use of child welfare funding. Flexible funding in combination with strategic partnerships between community based organizations and other public systems has allowed our child welfare system to be more responsive to the needs of children and families at risk.

Because we know that change is possible, we have implemented an entire strategy that focuses on the disproportionality of children of color in the foster care system. Our investments in early prevention programs can help to ensure that boys and young men of color grow up to be productive, engaged citizens and fathers for the next generation.

Policy Perspective- Systems Collaboration

As policy makers we can build an integrated service delivery system that responds to the needs of this population. As a social services agency our commitment is to engage other system and community leaders as well as other stakeholders to create a synergy across systems to improve outcomes for boys and men of color and their families. These cross systems collaborations can have great impact on the clients we jointly serve. For example, SSA recently invested \$13 million to support programs in the Probation Department that will impact outcomes for boys of color. Without focused attention to areas of need, resources, and creative services, public systems will continue to fail families of color.

These long standing issues can not be solved by a single system leader or single agency, but collectively, we can make a difference both legislatively and programmatically. For example, Social Services introduced the Fatherhood Advisory Council to address concerns regarding fathers - predominantly fathers of color- who are often absent from the lives of their children. This collaboration between Social Services, Probation, Child Support, Health Care, Education, Community Based organizations, and the Board of Supervisors explores how our systems can better coordinate to support fathers, reconnect them to their children and families and eliminate access barriers. Emphasis is given to those who have traditionally been labeled "hard to serve" - such as, fathers with criminal backgrounds, or a history of substance abuse and domestic violence.

Among the many factors influencing the opportunities for and the achievements of fathers of color and their sons are public perceptions. Changing the perceptions of employers, teachers, health care providers and law enforcement is a critical first step in changing lives. We need to embrace the notion that our community has a responsibility to invest in solutions to address the current challenges facing boys and young men of color. Public systems can also benefit from family friendly policies such as vocational education for youth, living wage opportunities for adults and increased family supports.

Closing - The Ask

Chairman Swanson and members of the committee, you know all too well what inaction means. We would, in fact, seal the fate of boys and young men of color for generations to come. For me, inaction means that I will continue to see women standing outside of Social Services offices with young boys of color in tow. It means that I will continue to address a growing General Assistance population of which 74% are men of color. It means that I will have to continue implementing system interventions designed to address the disproportionate representation of boys of color in the foster care system. And, as a mother of three sons, it means that I must continue to be the voice of mothers who are not afforded my platform.

Children do not grow up in isolation. Children are raised in families, families are part of communities and those families touch multiple systems within our County. Families function best when all members are supported and valued by our community.

I ask this committee to support legislative changes that would make a significant difference in the lives of boys and men of color by:

- Eliminating regulations and policies that create program disincentives that adversely impact boys and men of color;
- Continuing flexible funding opportunities that allow leaders to address the needs of their communities on a more individualized basis;
- Creating education and training opportunities to increase employment options for boys and men of color;
- Continuing this critical dialogue – acknowledging the strengths of boys and men of color; and
- Viewing this work as our legacy and not as a trend or the latest hot button issue

In closing, here is my hope (and expectation): that we will continue to invest our time, our fiscal resources, and our inspired passion to ensure that change is not simply a catch phrase, but a reality for boys and young men of color.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address the committee.