DATE: May 1, 2020

TO: Board of Supervisors
Jeffrey V. Smith, M.D., J.D., County Executive

FROM: Robert Menicocci, Social Services Agency Director

SUBJECT: Off-Agenda Report Relating to Mental Health Screenings of Children Newly Entering into Care and Streamline Services

On February 25, 2020, the County of Santa Clara (County) Social Services Agency (SSA), Department of Family and Children’s Services (DFCS) presented information regarding system improvements enacted after the closure of the Receiving, Assessment, and Intake Center (RAIC) to the Board of Supervisors (Board) (Item No. 9). At that meeting, Supervisor Ellenberg requested information relating to behavioral health screenings for children newly entering into care and streamlined initial screening services to ensure children receive timely mental health care.

Pathways to Well-Being

In 2002, the federal class action lawsuit Katie A. v. Bonta was filed against the California Department of Social Services, Department of Health Services, and the County of Los Angeles alleging insufficient mental health services were available to children in the child welfare system. The case resulted in a settlement agreement that provided a framework for significant improvements in access to mental health care for California’s youth and children, known as Pathways to Well-Being. Pathways to Well-Being requires the child welfare and mental health systems coordinate to ensure that children involved in the dependency system receive comprehensive behavioral health screenings and mental health referrals, including to a community-based behavioral health services program known as Katie A. Intensive Mental Health Services.

The County’s Pathways to Well-Being program

The County’s Pathways to Well-Being program, administered by the Behavioral Health Services Department (BHSD) and in partnership with DFCS, ensures all children in the child welfare system are screened to determine behavioral health needs and are linked to appropriate services, which may include community-based behavior health services known as Katie A. Intensive Services or another mental health program within the County’s system of care.

Katie A. Intensive Services are provided by four contracted County providers: Uplift Family Services (Uplift), Rebekah Children’s Services, Seneca Family of Agencies, and Asian Americans for Community Involvement. The services contain the following elements:

- Intensive community and home-based mental health services;
Intensive Care Coordination (ICC);
Intensive Home-Based services (IHBS);
Team approach, which may include a family specialist or family partner;
Child and Family Team (CFT) model with strong emphasis on family voice and choice;
Strength-based, trauma-informed services and supports;
Individualized to the needs of the child and family;
Services to improve youth’s coping skills and functioning for success;
Psychiatric services/medication management;
Individual therapy;
Family therapy; and
Service delivery guided by the California Integrated Core Practice Model.

Pathways to Well-Being screening process

BHSD and DFCS work in coordination to ensure all children under the County’s care receive behavior health screenings and referrals for mental health services when needed. All children are screened shortly after they enter into care and when there is a determination made that a child welfare case will be opened by DFCS. The information is gathered in partnership with the placing social worker and the BHSD team at the Keiki Center.

The screening is then sent by BHSD to the BHSD Pathways to Well-Being Coordinator located at DFCS’s Julian Street campus. The coordinator reviews the child’s behavioral health history and gathers information from the new social worker (Dependency Investigator) to ensure the child receives the most appropriate level of care and to verify whether a mental health referral is needed. The child’s eligibility for Medi-Cal benefits is also verified. Upon completion of the screening and determination of the level of care for behavioral health services, BHSD’s Pathways to Well-Being coordinator submits a referral directly to a contracted Katie A. Intensive Services provider for services, or to the Behavioral Health Call Center for immediate assignment to a behavioral health provider.¹ The screening and referral process is typically completed within three days. Additionally, behavioral health referrals may be made to other mental health programs, such as the Independent Living Program, the Transformation Team (for confirmed or at-risk commercially sexually exploited youth), or to non Medi-Cal mental health programs contracted through DFCS. Confirmation that a referral has been made is sent to the child’s social worker.

Additionally, the DFCS placement team can refer a child to Placement Stabilization Services (PSS), which is available through Uplift, who provides a team of mental health and support staff to wrap and stabilize the child within hours of entering into care and to continue to provide support services for up to sixty days or until the child is stable. The PSS team works to link the child to ongoing behavioral health services, in consultation and collaboration with the child’s social worker.

Children with the highest acuity of needs are referred for services via the Interagency Placement Committee (IPC), which consists of staff from DFCS, BHSD, and Juvenile Probation. Referrals from IPC could include wraparound, Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC), or Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program (STRTP) services.

¹ This service, provided by BHSD, is available to the community to provide screenings and referrals to children who are in need of behavioral health services.
If a child remains in the care of their parents, the assigned DFCS social worker is responsible for completing the Pathways to Well-Being form so the child can receive an initial mental health screening. This form is to be completed within 30 days after the child’s first in-person contact with any DFCS staff or when the family’s initial case plan is completed, whichever is earlier. The form is submitted to the BHSD’s Pathways to Well-Being team for appropriate linkages and referrals.

Children who remain in the dependency system receive follow-up behavior health screenings at least once a year. Furthermore, children may receive additional screenings if they present significant changes of behavior or circumstances, including but not limited to high-risk behaviors, self-harm, psychiatric hospitalization, or placement changes.

**Efforts to streamline initial screening services and referrals**

BHSD and DFCS currently hold a monthly collaborative meeting regarding the Pathways to Well-Being screening and collaborative workflow process, with a goal to reduce redundancies and ensure every child has timely access to behavioral health services when needed. The team’s newly identified goal is to ensure that information regarding mental health referrals (not just screenings) is entered into the Child Welfare System/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), the statewide database used by child welfare agencies.

Additionally, every other month, BHSD hosts a Pathways to Well-Being Community Team meeting with agency partners, community stakeholders, parents, and caregivers. The goal of the meeting is to ensure that youth served by child welfare are connected to appropriate mental health services and have access to Katie A. Intensive Services when needed, and that stakeholders have updated information on available services and cross-system processes.

During the novel coronavirus pandemic, DFCS is continuing to send screenings to the Pathways to Well-Being coordinators to ensure connection to behavioral health services.

C:  Chief Board Aides
Miguel Márquez, Chief Operating Officer
James R. Williams, County Counsel
Megan Doyle, Clerk of the Board