

Racial Equity Analysis: Valley of the Moon STRTP

Step 1: What is your proposal and the desired results and outcomes?

1. Describe the policy, program, practice, or budget decision (for the sake of brevity, we refer to this as a “proposal” in the remainder of these steps)

Family, Youth, & Children’s Services (FY&C), a Division of the Human Services Department (HSD), is seeking approval to open and operate a Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program (STRTP) in July 2024. STRTPs are residential placements designed to serve foster youth who have significant experiences of trauma and are unable to safely live within a family or independent living environment; their complex needs require intensive therapeutic treatment services to adequately meet their behavioral and mental health needs.

2. What are the intended results (in the community) and outcomes (within your own organization)?

Children in foster care are a uniquely vulnerable population with increased educational, behavioral, and mental health needs due to high rates of complex trauma that arises from adverse childhood experiences, such as child abuse, neglect or abandonment, exposure to domestic violence, or lack of parenting. These young people experience an increased number of risk factors that often lead to a disproportionate number of negative outcomes as they become adults including, ongoing mental health needs, employment instability, and homelessness; which in turn, lead to a disproportionate use of Safety Net services to support them while in adulthood.

The STRTP is an upstream investment to fill a social service gap in Sonoma County by providing intensive treatment in a therapeutic setting to support foster youth to address their complex needs so that their trajectory to successful adulthood is bolstered and transformed.

3. What does this proposal have an ability to impact?

- Increased access for behavioral and mental health services for children and youth.
- Reduction of time in out-of-home care for foster youth.
- Increased life skills including coping strategies, resilience building, and stress management for foster youth.

Step 2: What’s the data? What does the data tell us?

1. Will the proposal have impacts in specific geographic areas (neighborhoods, areas, or regions)? What are the racial demographics of those living in the area?

The STRTP is designed to serve local foster youth that qualify for this level of treatment, not residents of any particular geographical area. The STRTP will be located at the Valley of the Moon Children’s Center and will utilize space currently available on the campus and not require any additional construction that could impact surrounding areas.

2. What does population level data, including quantitative and qualitative data, tell you about existing racial inequities? What does it tell you about root causes or factors influencing racial inequities?

Young people of color are overrepresented in foster care across the nation entering into care at much higher rates when compared to their white counterparts. This is also reflected in Sonoma County Child Welfare system, particularly for Black and Native American youth.

FY&C analyzed data from 2022 comparing overall population by race and ethnicity to Child Protective Services Hotline calls, investigations, substantiations, and entries into foster care. While 3.6% of the overall population of Sonoma County identifies as Black, 5.3% of youth are in Sonoma County foster care identify as Black. Likewise, while 0.8% of the overall population of Sonoma County identifies as Native American, 4.4% of youth in Sonoma County foster care identify as Native American. More reflective of the overall population are Hispanic youth; 42.1% of youth in Sonoma County foster care identify as Hispanic comparable to the 41.7% overall population of Sonoma County that identifies as Hispanic.

Further analysis showed that of the 30 youth that received residential treatment services in a STRTP over that same time period, 40% of youth identified as Hispanic (12 youth) and 13% of youth identified as Native American (4 youth). This smaller population of youth continues to reflect the trend of overrepresentation for Native American youth in particular.

3. What performance level data do you have available for your proposal? This should include data associated with existing programs or policies.

Sonoma County serves approximately 430 minor foster youth each year; on average, six to eight percent of those youth (25-34) need intensive treatment services to address past and/or current trauma, mental health needs, or substance use issues. Timeliness to receive these services is challenged, however. Continuum of Care Reform is not fully realized yet locally nor across the state.

The demand for STRTPs far exceeds the statewide capacity and as such, Sonoma County youth with the most acute needs are frequently declined admission to STRTPs. At any given time, an average of 6 youth needing a STRTP reside at the VMCC emergency shelter, often for months, without receiving these much needed services. Choosing a STRTP location closer to home is often not an option. Openings in STRTPs are rare and a youth is placed when one is available even if the location does not lend itself to reunification services, family therapy, and the nurturing of natural supports.

FY&C has been collaborating with the local STRTPs within Sonoma County to increase their acceptances of Sonoma County youth into their programs. While that collaboration has resulted in doubling the number of youth accepted into the local programs from 10% to 20%, it still leaves 80% of foster youth being placed outside county lines to get their intensive therapeutic needs met.

4. Are there data gaps? What additional data would be helpful in analyzing the proposal? If so, how can you obtain better data?

Family, Youth, & Children's Services is committed to addressing disproportionality of young people in foster care. FY&C has embarked on a case review analysis of the overrepresented youth in foster care. We anticipate the results of that analysis to be delivered by December 2023 and will utilize that information to inform and evolve best practices.

Valley of the Moon STRTP will be evaluating the effectiveness of the program and how best to meet the cultural needs of the young people participating in the program through quantitative and qualitative

data analysis. The program will track demographic data, behavioral and mental health goal outcomes, youth and family surveys, as well as placement stability rates of youth that transition out of the STRTP.

Step 3: How have communities been engaged? Are there opportunities to expand engagement?

1. Who are the most affected community members who are concerned with or have experience related to this proposal? How have you involved these community members in the development of this proposal?

FY&C engaged in an extensive literature review and initiated a robust stakeholder feedback process in 2016-2017 comprised of foster youth, caregivers, FY&C staff, County partners, and service providers to ascertain how VMCC could meet the vision of Continuum of Care Reform (CCR). A comprehensive vision emerged to meet the evolving needs of Sonoma County foster youth:

- 1) Reduce the length of stay in the Emergency Shelter to 10 days by transforming it into a trauma informed Temporary Shelter Care Facility.
- 2) Develop coordinated transitions from the shelter with services and supports attached to ensure stabilization in new homes with youth and caregivers.
- 3) Build a resource hub for caregivers to develop networks, mentorship, find accessible resources and supports.
- 4) Provide a local STRTP to supplement the local and statewide options for intensive therapeutic services so that Sonoma County youth can be served within their own community.

Over the past six years, VMCC has been implementing that vision and is now positioned to support the array of placement options youth may need. The Center currently includes both the Temporary Shelter Care Facility (Children's Home) and the Emergency Foster Home program, as well as the Caregiver Resource Unit, which is comprised of Resource Family recruitment, Resource Family approval, and ongoing Caregiver support. Finally, the Transition Support team coordinates services to support placement stabilization in the community and coordinates placements into a Resource Home or higher level of care for youth out of the shelter.

Subsequently, FY&C hosts a Partners in Permanency collaborative each quarter to engage community service providers that serve foster youth that need enhanced behavioral or mental health supports. This group is comprised of Foster Family Agencies, Wraparound Service Providers, local STRTPs, Behavioral Health, and Juvenile Probation. The goal of the collaborative is to build and maintain relationships, increase efficiencies across partnerships to optimize resources for foster youth and their caregivers, and identify barriers and gaps to services and how to address those. An ongoing gap of service is capacity to serve youth with the most intense needs in a residential setting locally.

Additionally, FY&C is currently engaged in a County Self-Assessment (CSA) process to inform the agency's next 5-year System Improvement Plan. The CSA process includes community feedback, focus groups for foster youth, caregivers, Tribes, service providers, FY&C staff, and community partners. The overarching focus of the CSA process is to improve permanency outcomes for foster youth. A recurring barrier for permanency is the need for intensive treatment and lack of capacity to meet it.

2. What has your engagement process told you about the burdens or benefits for different groups?

The lack of a local STRTP placements not only negatively affects the youth's ability to maintain connections with friends, family, school, and other community while placed at out of county STRTPs, it also undermines discharge planning and their ability to be successful in a family environment. We know that stepping down from an STRTP can be a vulnerable time for a youth and that there is a risk that a youth may exhibit thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that result in being placed back in a STRTP setting.

The program's aim is to provide a coordinated trauma-informed, individualized, strengths-based treatment approach with highly trained staff to address the immediate and underlying needs of Sonoma County youth in a Sonoma County setting resulting in strong networks of support that can stabilize a young person in a family setting, reducing the need to go back to a residential environment.

3. What has your engagement process told you about the factors that produce or perpetuate racial inequity related to this proposal?

Young people of color are overrepresented in foster care across the nation entering into care at much higher rates when compared to their white counterparts. This is also reflected in Sonoma County Child Welfare system, particularly for Black and Native American youth.

FY&C has engaged multiple community stakeholders to develop a 5-year prevention plan to support the community with resources in an effort to reduce the need for CPS intervention and reduce the overrepresentation of Black and Native American youth in the foster care system.

Step 4: What are your strategies for advancing racial equity?

1. Given what you have learned from research and stakeholder involvement, how will the proposal increase or decrease racial equity? Who would benefit from or be burdened by your proposal?

The ability to include families in treatment was one of the primary rationales for developing the Valley of the Moon STRTP, as currently most youth are served out of county making family treatment and reunification efforts much more difficult.

Services are intensive and time-limited in order to support youth to develop the skills that they need to be able to return home as quickly as possible, including a very short-term assessment option for those who can return home more quickly. The STRTP programming includes family supports, such as family therapy, parent education and support groups, and family-inclusive activities on the weekend (e.g., BBQ) that equip the family to also prepare for the eventual return of their youth and promote family preservation.

2. What are potential unintended consequences? What are the ways in which your proposal could be modified to enhance positive impacts or reduce negative impacts?

While the intention of the program is to meet the immediate behavioral and mental health needs of youth in an intensive residential setting, the young person and the family they are transitioning to need to be able to sustain what they have learned from the program and apply that in a real world context. An area we need to be cautious of is ensuring that supports after a youth transitions from the STRTP are

building up the confidence and tools for the youth and family to maintain and sustain once our transition supports end.

3. Are there complementary strategies that you can implement? What are ways in which existing partnerships could be strengthened to maximize impact in the community? How will you partner with stakeholders for long-term positive change?

FY&C will continue to engage Foster Family Agencies, Wraparound Service Providers, local STRTPs, Behavioral Health, and Juvenile Probation in developing best ways to collectively support this population of foster youth. This includes the continued collaborative work of,

- Partners for Permanency
- Recruitment, approval, and training of caregivers (relatives and unmatched families)
- Responsive services for in home supports
- Engagement of relatives, kin, and service providers in team decision making
- Partnering with Behavioral Health and Juvenile Probation on new initiatives and opportunities from the California Department of Social Services

All partners are necessary to meet the needs of foster youth who need enhanced levels of care.

4. Are the impacts aligned with your community outcomes defined in Step #1?

Yes

Step 5: What is your plan for implementation?

1. Describe your plan for implementation.

STRTPs must go through a robust authorization process to become a licensed provider, which includes a state application to the CDSS, approval from the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) to deliver mental health services, as well as receiving accreditation from the Council on Accreditation (COA).

VMCC applied for and was issued a provisional STRTP license by CDSS on 6/05/2023. Subsequently, VMCC submitted a program application to DHCS on 8/01/23 for approval of the mental health program and will enter into the Medi-Cal Site Certification process with Sonoma County Behavioral Health once DHCS approves our program plan.

VMCC has been consulting with The Indigo Project to develop and implement the STRTP. They will continue to support the implementation through the first year of operation. Additionally, Behavioral Health is partnering with FY&C to support the successful implementation of the program.

2. Is your plan:

Realistic? Yes

Adequately funded? Yes

Adequately resourced with personnel? Yes

Adequately resourced with mechanisms to ensure successful implementation and enforcement? Yes

Adequately resourced to ensure on-going data collection, public reporting, and community engagement? Yes

If the answer to any of these questions is no, what resources or actions are needed? N/A

Step 6: How will you ensure accountability, communicate, and evaluate results?

1. How will impacts be documented and evaluated? Are you achieving the anticipated outcomes? Are you having impact in the community?

Valley of the Moon STRTP will be evaluating the effectiveness of the program and how best to meet the cultural needs of the young people participating in the program through quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The program will track demographic data, behavioral and mental health goal outcomes, youth and family surveys, as well as placement stability rates of youth that transition out of the STRTP.

2. What are your messages and communication strategies that will help advance racial equity?

- Ensure equity and disproportionality issues are addressed in prevention services, interventions, and outcomes, and in the child welfare system itself.
- Continue with internal analyses to identify areas of practice that need to change to promote racial equity.

3. How will you continue to partner and deepen relationships with communities to make sure your work to advance racial equity is working and sustainable for the long haul?

FY&C will continue to engage community members and partners in prevention planning and implementation. The overall aim is to reduce disparity and disproportionality in child abuse and neglect across Sonoma County. This will be accomplished through creating and sustaining an equitable prevention system that promotes equitable decision-making, assessment, interventions, and opportunities for the diverse array of families across our community. It requires eliminating bias and other inequities in our existing structures, attitudes, actions and decisions. These reforms will depend on the meaningful and authentic involvement of equity partners and those with lived experience being integrally involved in these reflections, system changes, and transformations. All partners of Sonoma's coalition agree with this continuous focus on equity and are committed to continually improving the culture and climate of families' service experiences at the internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels to ensure this fundamental value takes hold.