

# **THE SUBSTANCE ABUSE RECOVERY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (SARMS)**

## ***INTRODUCTION***

Parents seeking to reunify with their neglected or abused children are encouraged to participate in the Substance Abuse Recovery Management System (SARMS). The SARMS Program has been in existence since 1998. The primary goal of the program is to help families through successful alcohol and/or drug treatment and supportive case management. In SARMS, parents are required to meet regularly with a “recovery specialist” who monitors their attendance at court, counseling sessions, and 12-step meetings as well as administering random drug tests. Participation in the program starts with a court order for the parents to seek assistance in a drug treatment program. Enrollment in SARMS is voluntary, but strict adherence to the program then becomes a part of the court ordered reunification plan.

After enrollment in the program, the court orders substance abusing parents to progress through the SARMS Program before they can be considered for reunification with their children. They do so as a precursor to the Dependency Court Recovery Project (DCRP) should the need arise. The DCRP, reserved for multiple relapses, is designed to help drug dependent parents who find it difficult to meet their substance abuse treatment objectives. One of the sanctions that was previously used for parents in Dependency Drug Court for testing positive or by not showing up for required meetings and court hearings was short term incarceration. That has since been deemed unlawful and is no longer practiced. Parents who did not successfully complete the program were subject to a variety of consequences depending on their individual situation up to and including termination of parental rights. Successful results stemming from the use of family drug court programs such as SARMS, conducted in conjunction with standardized drug court programs have been well documented.

Since the inception of the SARMS Program, the resolution of foster care cases has dramatically reduced the amount of time it takes to reunify families from thirty-six months down to thirteen months. The success of the program is further measured by the money the County of San Diego saves. Before the implementation of SARMS “... the County spent on average \$2.7 million dollars for treatment and foster care services for 50 parents. After SARMS, that dropped to \$1.5 million.”<sup>1</sup>

There are no documented investigations or studies conducted by previous Grand Juries on the subject of SARMS. During the course of another investigation, it was revealed to the 2009/2010 San Diego County Grand Jury, that significant modifications to the SARMS Program were to be made.

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<sup>1</sup> Children’s Advocate, “Drug Court is Beautiful!” Nov.- Dec. 2003, Leslie Albrecht

## ***INVESTIGATION***

In March 2010, the Grand Jury became aware of impending cuts to the SARMS Program to become effective in late June 2010. The Grand Jury initiated an investigation. The objective of this investigation was to determine:

- if the program in its entirety was to be cut,
- the effect on family reunification,
- the effect the cuts would have on County employees directly involved with the program,
- short and long term effect the cuts would have on those who would otherwise be ordered by the courts to attend and participate in the SARMS Program, and
- the effect on our communities.

During the course of this investigation information was gathered through a review of the cost/benefit study “Analysis of Foster Care Costs” from the *Family Treatment Drug Court Retrospective Study, San Diego County, California, September 2003*. It is important to note that for this report, a cost/benefit analysis focuses on a given financial outcome, such as can be substantially measured in terms of decreased costs to the County and to society.

Additionally, a series of Grand Jury interviews were conducted to determine:

- Why is the SARMS Program being reduced/modified?
- What are the cost savings of this action?
- How would one evaluate the effectiveness of the SARMS Program in facilitating the reunification process for cooperating parents?
- What effect if any would the discontinuance of the SARMS Program have on the length of time it would take for successful family reunification?
- What effect will the proposed cuts have on the case loads of Child Welfare Services (CWS) social workers?

Interviews were conducted with:

- Juvenile Court Judges
- County Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) representatives
- Child Welfare Services (CWS) administrative staff
- CWS Social Workers

The Grand Jury learned that the decision to modify the SARMS Program was made because of recent budgetary shortfalls. Areas affected by the modifications and the means by which they will be adjusted are discussed below.

## **THE PLAN TO MODIFY SARMS**

The SARMS Program is to be modified. Changes will be made to the function of case management. SARMS case managers generally follow a given case from start to finish ensuring all court ordered requirements are being followed by addicted parents as they move forward in the system toward reunification with their children. Because of this

close hand-in-hand progression through the system, a SARMS case manager earns the respect and trust of their clients. CWS social workers have neither the time nor resources to follow through on such a personal level as the SARMS case manager. However, along with their usual duties and responsibilities, the social workers will now be required to do so.

On January 23, 2009, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency assembled an Operational Planning Advisory Board for fiscal years 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 to determine which areas of the county's alcohol and drug programs, including SARMS, to modify. Program services were listed and then given a prioritized level of high, medium or low. They were then divided into sub-categories; the decision was then made as to whether to retain or to reduce/change a specific area of the program.

The advisory board determined that high priority changes were to be made to specified SARMS related programs as follows:

- Residential-Special Populations: Reduce services to ethnic/population specific programs
- Non-Residential-Pregnant/Parenting Women: Reduce services or capacity
- Non-Residential-General Adults: Reduce services/number of Regional Recovery Centers
- Non-Residential-Special Populations: Eliminate services for ethnic population specific programs and integrate into general adult Regional Recovery Centers

## **WORKLOADS**

The courts will continue to have a staff person located on-site at each court location to provide immediate substance abuse screening, treatment referral and arrange for an initial intake appointment for parents in need of substance abuse treatment. County social workers will then be required to increase their work load by adding the duties previously performed by SARMS case managers. These duties include the monitoring of individual counseling, education sessions, process groups, vocational development, parenting classes, alcohol and drug testing and enrollment in self help groups such as Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous. With the pending changes, following cases as they move forward through drug dependency court, the onus will be placed on the social worker through the use of the "E-Court Software System". This system will enable the workers to maintain contact with service providers regarding current waiting lists, monitoring drug testing results, and dealing with their client's creative manipulation of the program. Ever increasing workloads will slow down the system as it pertains to family reunification. The proposed changes may result in addicted parents having to identify and register in recognized, accepted treatment programs on their own accord, especially if they are not successful in their initial placement.

There are two instances where this slowdown will be most apparent. First, the majority of SARMS case managers are former addicts themselves making them empathetic to hurdles in

the system for recovering parents. They frequently act as supportive “coaches” to parents in the program. They further aid in the search for rehabilitation programs with available slots. The elimination of the case management component of SARMS will result in the farming out of their work to County social workers. The redirection of their work loads will disjoint the reunification process by creating a bottleneck of paperwork

Second, despite efforts made to keep clients in treatment, those who fail may be removed from the drug abuse program putting at risk their opportunity to be reunited with their families.

Both instances will create a gap in the provision of services and a delay obtaining pertinent up to date information which is necessary for the social worker to determine when and if a client is ready to process through reunification.

The importance of the compliance reporting system, which is basically a progress report that parents receive as they navigate through treatment programs, is illustrated in a 2007 report entitled *Effective Management of Parental Substance Abuse in Dependency Cases*, Hon. James R. Milliken (RET.), and Gina Rippel, JD., M.S.W. page 102:

...Timely and accurate reports of the parents’ progress in their treatment programs, submitted by the agency providing case management services, are critical. San Diego County as described earlier, contracts with a nonprofit agency specializing in alcohol and drug treatment to operate the SARMS Program. This agency provides case management services for each client and biweekly reports on the parents’ progress to the court and Children’s Services; objective weekly drug tests are done in every case. The agency is separate from Health and Human Services and Children’s Services. Social workers are not responsible for this aspect of the case.

This level of the program is essential to maximizing the opportunity for reunification in each case involving parental substance abuse; it provides guidance to abused and neglected children and their parents.

### **E-Court Software Program**

The updates that the compliance reporting system provided will now be processed by a contractor and manually entered into the E-Court System. This system can be accessed by CWS, attorneys, judges and treatment providers. Successful implementation of the program depends on the timely updating of the compliance information. The E-Court software program will reduce paperwork.

### **Economic Impact**

It is less expensive to educate someone rather than incarcerate them.  
It is less expensive to keep people in their homes rather than rebuild entire neighborhoods. It is less expensive to keep social service programs flowing rather than summarily issuing cuts. - Anonymous -

The Grand Jury investigation revealed that, social workers are extremely concerned that both the parents and their children will find themselves frustrated, unmotivated and caught in a system for extended periods of time that will lead to unsuccessful outcomes in reunification efforts and cost the County of San Diego more money in supportive services.

During the course of the Grand Jury investigation and research of the funding sources and associated costs of the SARMS Program and Dependency Drug Courts, the Grand Jury learned from a series of reports, including a recent report from Beacon Economics, that human service programs stimulate the economy, and that investing in these programs substantially reduces the need for and the cost of future services. With this fact in mind, careful consideration must be given to the importance of Health and Human Services Agencies: the effect they have on the communities they serve; the families who directly benefit from available programs and services; and, the overall impact associated with issues of economic interest (incarceration, costs to hospital emergency rooms, first responder services, etc.) as they affect us all.

*The Beacon Report*, an evaluation of the economic impact of spending on human services programs in California, concludes that:

- human service expenditures generate 1.32 dollars of economic activity for every dollar spent,
- output and employment resulting from program expenditures are greater than the expenditures alone would suggest,
- the total economic impact of human services programs was \$25 billion in 2007-2008, creating 132,000 jobs, and generating \$467 million in sales tax revenues.

It is conceivable that the economic impact could be much higher as Beacon employs a more conservative approach.

For example, in the case of child maltreatment and neglect, the associated costs of the offense include those accrued by the:

- child welfare system,
- hospitalization,
- law enforcement, and
- the judicial system.

There are other costs associated with:

- special education,
- juvenile delinquency,
- lost productivity, and
- finally, the average hospitalization charge for an abused or neglected child is nearly \$10,000 more than for other children.

In the case of substance abuse and domestic violence, the *Beacon Report* indicates that the impact of substance abuse assessment and treatment services demonstrate that the societal costs of substance abuse far outweigh assessment and treatment services costs.

The associated cost to society for each is:

- \$11,487 for absence of treatment in substance abuse cases,
- \$2,665 per physical assault,
- Victims of physical assaults lost 7.2 days of paid work per case.

The example used in this report, aimed at clarifying any question of societal value as it relates to human services program expenditures versus any cuts to a human services program, is the illustration of a woman earning \$15,000 per year. Already at the poverty line, she would lose on average \$435 in lost earnings every time she becomes a victim of physical violence. In many instances, this experience is what directly leads to costs associated with the incarceration of the violator, the raised likelihood of more substance abuse, and a rise in child maltreatment cases resulting in higher welfare caseloads. Too often, this cycle repeats itself.

In July 2009, the U.S. Department of Health And Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center For Substance Abuse Treatment issued a report entitled *The Cost Offset Of Substance Abuse Treatment Services*. This report estimates the financial cost of drug abuse disorders in the United States to be \$180 billion annually. The report was aimed at substantiating the claim that accessible and effective community-based drug abuse treatment programs are imperative to reduce society's financial burden from problems associated with drug use. The report warns that because of the continued rise in healthcare costs, drug abuse treatment and recovery programs must be able to offset health and societal costs.

This report, which made a cost comparison analysis in California, New York and Washington, concluded that:

- the benefits of treatment far outweighed the costs
- for every \$100,000 spent on treatment, \$487,000 are spent in healthcare costs
- \$700,000 of crime costs were shown to be avoided

In California, healthcare utilization savings of treated patients showed that:

- emergency room visits were down by 39%
- hospital stays were down by 35%
- total medical costs were down by 26%

For every dollar spent on drug abuse treatment programs, it saves \$7 on crime and criminal justice costs. When researchers added savings related to healthcare, the savings-to-costs ratio was 12 to 1.

## ***FACTS AND FINDINGS***

**Fact:** Effective July 1, 2010, the SARMS Program will be significantly modified.

**Fact:** The social workers union has not been made aware of these pending changes to either the SARMS Program or the effects these changes will have on the workload.

**Fact:** As a result of these modifications, the already heavy work loads for County social workers will be significantly increased.

**Fact:** The E-Court software computer monitoring system will be in place and regular updates to the program will be entered by a contractor.

**Fact:** The SARMS clients have a history of substance abuse.

**Fact:** Many SARMS clients employ creative means to manipulate a system that has limited checks and balances with which to monitor their progress through a rehabilitation program.

**Fact:** County social workers will require training in abuse case management techniques that are presently performed by SARMS case managers.

**Fact:** There is a lack of communication between CWS administrators and their social workers on the current status of the SARMS Program.

**Fact:** Under the revised SARMS Program, there will be no central source to coordinate services between treatment facilities, CWS and other service providers.

## ***FINDINGS***

***Finding 01:*** The modification of the SARMS Program includes the elimination of the role of SARMS case managers who generally follow a case from start to finish and ensure that all court ordered requirements are being followed by substance abusing parents.

***Finding 02:*** CWS Social Workers will be assigned the case management function heretofore performed by SARMS staff.

***Finding 03:*** There is a lack of communication between the social workers and CWS administration. As of May 1, 2010, many of the social workers had no knowledge of the pending modification to the SARMS Program and were unaware that they would be assuming the duties and responsibilities of case management services previously provided by SARMS case managers.

***Finding 04:*** With an increase in workloads, County social workers will be hard pressed to balance the new responsibility of monitoring compliance with substance abuse treatment with other ongoing responsibilities such as mandatory visits, court appearances, and organizing visitation with foster children and their families.

***Finding 05:*** Modification of the SARMS Program will impact the compliance reporting system and create a gap and a delay in obtaining pertinent up-to-date information such as

compliance by parents, their current status in the program, and if and when they may have tested positive.

***Finding 06:*** Delays resulting from the increased social worker workloads may result in a longer time to achieve family reunification.

***Finding 07:*** Clients who fail to meet court-ordered treatment standards, will be summarily removed from the drug abuse program putting at risk their opportunity to be reunited with their families. The timely transfer of information is necessary for the social worker to determine when and if a client is ready for reunification.

***Finding 08:*** Delayed or unsuccessful outcomes in reunification efforts will cost the County more in foster care payments and supportive services.

***Finding 09:*** Human service programs stimulate the economy and investing in these programs substantially reduces the need for and the cost of future services.

***Finding 10:*** There are costly long-term effects associated with reducing human services expenditures and case worker staffing levels such as ongoing poverty, a rise in child maltreatment, an increase in the number of domestic violence cases, and an advance towards continued substance abuse.

***Finding 11:*** Social workers have concerns regarding the pending cuts to SARMS, such as their inability to effectively serve their clients and manage caseloads.

***Finding 12:*** Social workers are anticipating even higher levels of stress and are concerned about the retention of their colleagues.

***Finding 13:*** There is no central source to coordinate services between treatment programs, CWS and other service providers. The creation of the position of a resource coordinator, who would have familiarity with all substance abuse treatment programs throughout the County and maintain waiting lists for client placement, would help facilitate the program placement efforts of CWS Social Workers.

## ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

**The 2009/2010 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that the Chief Administrative Officer of the County of San Diego direct that the Director of the Health and Human Services Agency and the Director of Child Welfare Services:**

**10-55: Identify and evaluate possible funding sources that would support reinstating the SARMS Program.**

**10-56: If the program is not reinstated, evaluate the social and economic impact of the SARMS Program modifications after one year.**

- 10-57:** Provide some mechanism, such as creating a new resource coordinator position in Child Welfare Services to help facilitate the placement efforts of County social service workers as they search for suitable facilities to place the children in their care. A resource coordinator would have familiarity with all placement facilities throughout the county, know what facility currently has available openings, and maintain, by priority, the waiting list(s) for client placement.
- 10-58:** Ensure that all Child Welfare Services social workers are informed as to the modification of the SARMS Program and how the changes affect them.
- 10-59:** Provide clear and concise training guidelines to all County social workers who will be involved with the case management aspect of the modified SARMS Program.

### ***COMMENDATION***

The 2009/2010 San Diego County Grand Jury recognizes the exceptional performance by the Director of the Health and Human Services Agency and the Director of Child Welfare Services, and their staffs. During the course of a separate investigation that did not generate a report, the Grand Jury focused on the issue of disproportionality of minority children in the foster care system and what percentage of these children were in fact reunited with their immediate families. CWS staff, acutely aware of this problem, is actively participating in the California Disproportionality Project and has implemented two region-specific projects to combat the disparity. Though the number of minority children in the foster care system is high, the efforts to reunify the family unit is a central focus and the numbers are directly in line with those reflected on the State level. We found that measures are in place to ensure a high probability of family reunifications.

The Director of the Health and Human Services Agency and the Director of Child Welfare Services and their staffs, are hereby recognized for their focus, dedication and exemplary work in both understanding and facing the challenges associated with the issue of disproportionality of minority children in the juvenile justice system, foster care services, and successfully managing family reunification efforts during the height of this budgetary crisis.

### ***REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS***

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such

comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
  - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding
  - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
  - (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
  - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
  - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
  - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.
- (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required from the:

<b><u>Responding Agency</u></b>	<b><u>Recommendations</u></b>	<b><u>Date</u></b>
Chief Administrative Officer County of San Diego	10-55 through 10-59	8/23/10

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