

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Annual Goals Set

We are well into 2007, and our continued positive performance clearly indicates how fully we are committed to achieving our goals and moving forward with implementing our five base strategies (POE, SDM, TDM, CPR & P3) throughout the department.

I have visited some of the regional offices already this year and your enthusiasm and dedication to your work, families and children have truly impressed me. You are experts in your field and during the year I look forward to visiting more offices to reach out and hear directly from you.

Meanwhile, I have submitted 2007 goals for the department to the Board of Supervisors and the Chief Administrative Officer. All of these goals are based on the department's three key outcomes of improved safety, reduced reliance on out-of-home care and increased permanence.

The seven goals for 2007 include:

- **Implementation of the IV-E Waiver;**
- **Reduction of the number of children/youth in foster care through reunification, legal guardianship or adoption by 8 percent;**
- **Reduction of the median number of days in out-of-home care by 15 percent;**
- **Reduction of abuse rates for children/youth in relative and non-relative foster care by 8 percent;**
- **Reduction of the total number of children/youth in long-term foster care by 20 percent;**
- **Implementation of a four-part ASFA (Adoption and Safe Families Act) Realignment Plan to achieve and maintain timely relative home assessments and reassessments; and**
- **Streamlining the department's child fatality and critical incident processes.**

I know we all are committed to keeping children safer and building stable families, and I believe these goals will assist us in achieving those objectives.

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Collaborative Effort Produces County-wide Plan to Reduce Child Abuse and Neglect

Lessen the number of cases coming into the department. Help social workers identify resources in the community. Build partnerships in the community to help respond to families' needs.

These are a few of the key elements behind a County-wide Prevention Initiative which unites the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH), the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services (DHS), the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families and many other agencies and stakeholders in a proactive plan to help prevent child abuse and neglect.

The Prevention Initiative, which is scheduled to roll-out this year, outlines several broad strategies that center on reducing the isolation felt by families, increasing communication between County agencies and community providers to provide better assistance and making resources more easily available to the community.

Key strategies include:

- Relationship-based networking and bringing families and communities together;
- Promoting family economic success to decrease poverty and increase family stability;
- Knitting together existing and new supports and services that members of communities can access easily.

"Proactive and all-inclusive planning around prevention is a newer concept for child welfare," said DCFS Deputy Director Angela Carter, who is overseeing the Prevention Initiative. "Our goal is to bring in communities to think of child abuse and neglect prevention as a community issue."

A main goal of the initiative, said Carter, is to ultimately have one "prevention network" in each Service Planning Area (SPA).

These networks will include community partners, SPA Councils, family support agencies partnering with Partnership for Families and First 5 L.A., RAs

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DCFS Success Stories

As a regular part of "DCFS News," we recognize the successes of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and its community partners. These success stories are diverse and offer an opportunity for staff and community partners to celebrate accomplishments and share the good work they are doing. To submit story ideas for this section, please e-mail Stuart Riskin of the DCFS Office of Public Affairs at riskis@dcfs.lacounty.gov.

This season in Success Stories we feature a former foster youth and the department's first Career Development Intern.

First Career Development Intern Determined to Succeed



Mallory Williams

Twenty-two-year-old Mallory Williams is a determined, intelligent young woman who knows where she is going. On June 7, 2006, Williams started her career with the County by becoming the first DCFS Career Development Intern (CDI). Now, she has a new position at DCFS headquarters as an Intermediate Typist Clerk.

As a foster child since the age of seven, Williams had the stability and support of living with her paternal grandmother, her aunt and later her aunt's daughter. Although her parents are not in her life (her mother died two years ago and her father lives in Nevada) Williams said that she is very close to her extended family on both sides and gets a great deal of support from them. She has no doubt that her parents loved each other. They were just too much alike in the choices they made in life, Williams believes.

Prior to living with her paternal grandmother, Williams lived with her maternal grandmother and mother. Numerous programs and a family intervention could not stop Williams' mother from alcoholism. But Williams has come to terms with her loss.

"I used to be angry, but I came to the acceptance that she had a disease." Since Williams' maternal grandmother was also her mother's protector, Williams could not stay with her. She was supposed to live with her aunt, but the courts felt that the proximity to her grandmother's home was not safe. Fortunately, her paternal grandmother reached out to her.

This move was fate since Williams' aunt died suddenly. This great loss was somewhat cushioned by her living with her paternal grandmother. Williams is very philosophical in retrospect. Things work out the way they do for a reason is her view.

Over the years, Williams has taken advantage of the programs that DCFS has to offer. It is this determination that has propelled Williams through life as a foster child.

"Throughout high school, which were my hardest years, I told

"Throughout high school, which were my hardest years, I told myself that I was not going to be a statistic."

—Mallory Williams, Intermediate Typist Clerk

myself that I was not going to be a statistic."

She participated in the DCFS foster youth graduation ceremony, Celebration 2003, hearing about it from her great aunt who is a social worker in San Francisco.

Williams went on to attend Cal Poly Pomona. She left after her first year saying that the school did not meet her needs, however, she was determined to continue her education. She came home and attended Pasadena and Glendale Community Colleges to complete her basic courses then transferred to California State University, Los Angeles, as a social work major. Her goal is to graduate and attend the University of Southern California for her Masters in Social Work.

Williams said she would like to see more time allotment and encouragement for youth to go to school. "Every boss should be as supportive as my boss, Lena Ward," said Mallory. "She works around my school schedule."

In the meantime, Williams is gaining experience as the first DCFS enrollee in the new CDI program.

"I think that the program is a great opportunity for myself and other youth interns. It's very beneficial to the department and embodies its entire mission statement." 🍷

For more information on the Career Development Intern program, contact Anita Shannon, manager of the DCFS Intern and Volunteer Development Section, at (213) 351-5506.

Annual Goals

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But while we move forward on these goals, we must constantly evaluate our methods to identify what is working and what has not been working. Over the past year, we have identified and examined some areas that need improvement.

Now we are putting special attention in these areas.

Specifically, we have examined the relative approval process and are designing a streamlined plan to ensure all relative home assessments are timely and relatives are provided with quality support and services. More than half of the children placed in out-of-home care are placed with family members and we need to make sure these children and their families are getting the attention and assistance they need to provide good care and keep the children safe.

In addition, the department will continue to work with our community partners on a broad prevention strategy that will alter the way we provide front-end services. A Countywide prevention strategy will lessen incidents of abuse and neglect as well as the amount of low risk referrals being opened and will ensure these children and families receive appropriate community-based services. This will give us an opportunity to better focus and provide more intensive services to children and families who are at the highest risk.

We will continue to broaden and strengthen our services to those who are most in need of our services, including some of the neediest in our community, homeless families and runaways throughout the County.

As we move forward on these goals, improvements and strategies, you will see new faces coming on board. The department has recently received authorization to hire additional staff to assist us in achieving our goals by streamlining programs, assisting social work units and ultimately reducing social worker caseloads and workload.

I know these goals and improvements are challenging, and I am very confident that through your hard work, commitment and talent, we will achieve and in many instances, surpass our goals for this year. 🌟

Patricia S. Ploehn, LCSW
Director

Prevention Initiative

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through their Community Advisory Councils, DMH, DHS, schools, faith-based organizations and work-force investment boards.

A model for the Prevention Initiative already exists in Service Planning Area (SPA) 8 where there is a strong community-based collaboration between three agencies that identify and serve families. According to Nick Ippolito, Children's Deputy for Supervisor Don Knabe, these agencies work with families to help them overcome life stresses such as poverty. The agencies connect families with skills training and local business owners who provide jobs. The SPA has also organized parenting classes and school cleanups to lessen the feeling of isolation among at-risk families.

The seeds for a County-wide Prevention Initiative were planted years ago but formally started to take shape in 2002 when the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, through a motion by Supervisors Don Knabe and Zev Yaroslavsky, directed the Children's Planning Council (CPC) to develop strategies to prevent child abuse and neglect.

The CPC joined with DCFS in a Prevention Workgroup, co-chaired by the Commission for Children and Families. The workgroup produced a plan that defined three "levels" of prevention to focus on.

- **First level – Efforts to target the general population, supporting families.**
- **Second level – Efforts to target families who may have special needs or who are at high risk as a result of one or more inconclusive reports to DCFS.**
- **Third level – Efforts that target families when maltreatment has been substantiated and provide services to prevent further maltreatment.**

"The goal of preventing children from entering the dependency system and of keeping them safe is challenging," said Sandra Rudnick, Vice Chair of the L.A. County Commission for Children and Families. "This initiative provides a blue print for change with an emphasis on improving communities and keeping families intact. Our success hinges on many agencies pooling resources and working together."

The department is currently looking at the calls that come in to DCFS' Child Protection Hotline to see what the initial needs of the family are and to see how many are low-, moderate- or high-risk. Department staff are also looking at evaluated-out calls to see what the family needs are and what the issues are to begin looking at a common profile among families.

"This initiative builds on knowledge, resources and relationships that have been developing here over the last 15 to 20 years," said Dr. Jacquelyn McCroskey, a member of the Prevention Workgroup. "Since there are already a number of agencies doing this work, we need to encourage their efforts and study the results achieved in a more purposeful way. By investing strategically in prevention, we cannot only improve results in Los Angeles, but stand as a model for the whole child welfare field." 🌟



SPA SPOTS

Children participate in the Spark of Love holiday event.

In every issue, "DCFS News" provides information about what's happening in the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) Service Planning Areas (SPAs). If you have SPA news to report, please submit your ideas to Stuart Riskin of the DCFS Public Affairs Office at riskin@dcfs.lacounty.gov.

Holiday Events Bring Excitement to Thousands of Kids

This past holiday season resulted in a variety of fun and exciting events for foster youth and their families.

For the ninth consecutive year, the United States Postal Workers delivered more than 3,000 holiday gifts to the North Hollywood office. This year was especially exciting with TV Azteca, ABC7 TV, the *Los Angeles Daily News* and the Chinese media covering the 200 helpers unloading the 20 carloads of gifts. Event organizer SCSW Lovette Panthier describes the office parking lot as a "sea of toys."

The Teague Family Foundation again shared the holiday spirit with gifts to families in the DCFS Family Preservation and Wraparound programs. Two of the three parties were in new locations.

The combined Compton-Wateridge offices held their party for 150 in the same location as last year at the Audubon Middle School in Los Angeles.

The Torrance party moved to the Toyota Meeting Hall at the Torrance Cultural Arts Center and the Lakewood party was held at the Lakewood Country Club. Torrance and Lakewood each had 100 children attend.

The annual Spark of Love Holiday Party sponsored by ABC7 TV, CVS Drugstores and the Los Angeles County Fire Department treated DCFS foster youth and their caregivers to "The Santa Claus III" movie, lunch, music, singing and gifts. The Bridge Theatres in Culver City and the Norwalk AMC theatres hosted more than 1,800 attendees combined. Los Angeles City Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa joined Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke at the Bridge for the holiday festivities and pictures.

It was a "cut and slash" holiday for the DCFS Metro North kids. Slash, former lead guitarist of the hard rock band Guns N' Roses and lead guitarist of Velvet Revolver, pulled up to the Metro North offices in Gibson Guitar's 45-foot bus and delivered 14 guitars.

All the kids involved in the event went into the bus with the CSWs to meet Slash and receive their autographed instruments. Former DCFS SCSW Lysandra Aguirre planted the seeds for this successful event when she started a relationship with The Neighborhood Preschool in Sherman Oaks.

The school adopted the Metro North office and over the past four years has donated holiday gifts. 🍷

New Program to Recruit Volunteers

DCFS Human Resources has expanded to include the department's Volunteer Outreach Program. Since community support is vitally important to strengthening DCFS' profile with local stakeholders, newly appointed manager Anita Shannon will oversee a corps of volunteers who will be used to assist with various special events involving the department.

These events may range from fundraisers to faith-based breakfasts. One goal of the program is to help the local community to have a better understanding of DCFS and its mission. The volunteer program will be separate from the DCFS mentoring program, which deals specifically with supportive, one-on-one relationships with DCFS foster youth.

A program structure is currently being created. The program procedures will include live scanning and evaluating potential volunteers to ascertain their appropriateness as well as an orientation program. A computer program will be created to match office and event needs with the talents and interest of individual volunteers.

For more information on the DCFS Volunteer Program, please call Anita Shannon at (213) 351-5506. 🍷

Intern Program Grows in DCFS

The Community Development Intern (CDI) Program is proving to be a huge success within DCFS. The program has grown from two youth joining the intern program last year, to 20 trainees currently.

Developed as a supportive program for new interns, but to also bring the youth into the County fold, this program reaches out to youth transitioning out of the foster care system. It offers them job training with the possibility of a permanent job with the County after two years. All DCFS foster youth who are eligible for the department's Independent Living Program (ILP) can apply to this program.

All applicant eligibility is checked and verified by ILP coordinators. Applicants must go through the routine County application process. They must pass a County clerical exam and take a multi-tiered test to check their strengths and to determine their banding. Once this testing is completed and scored the youth is placed on a list that is distributed County wide, so the youth can choose where they want to work. A consortium of County departments can select any



Success stories highlighted at luncheon.



Pomona Office open house.

youth on the list.

Once in a job placement, the youth has the benefits of job training, mentoring as well as all County employee benefits. Mentors are carefully matched with the youth. Mentors can share successes with their mentee as well as help the intern handle any personal or work related issues that arise. On the job, they must perform like any other employee while being trained and educated about the department.

After their two-year internship is up, the youth is evaluated and based upon this review, they may be offered permanent employment or not.

One bonus that has come out of this program is a bonding that has taken place among the interns. They have created their own support system, which has been very beneficial for their work and lives.

For more information on the DCFS CDI Program, please call Anita Shannon at (213) 351-5506. 📞

Heart Gallery and Ambassador Program Boost Adoption Awareness

The National Heart Gallery Los Angeles County exhibition continues to be a huge success in spreading awareness of local adoptable children. In recent months the photo gallery has been displayed at The Pike amusement area in Long Beach, followed by Vince's Pasta & Pizza restaurant in Lancaster and College of the Canyons in Santa Clarita.

From May 8, 2007, through June 8, 2007, the pictures will be on display at The Church in Long Beach. A small reception event is planned in May at The Church for National Foster Care Month.

The owner of the Lancaster restaurant is one of the team leaders of the Adoption Ambassador Program. She sponsored a mini-adoption matching event on Valentines Day 2006. This small event was responsible for creating five adoptive matches when waiting children were introduced to adoptive applicants at the party.

The Adoption Ambassador Program is a volunteer program that was developed by the DCFS Adoption Division Placement and Recruitment Unit (PRU) in 2004. The program's mission is to train and utilize adoptive parents to partner with PRU to do recruitment in their communities. At the current time, there are four teams serving different geographical areas. The Adoption Ambassador Program has been very successful in recruiting adoptive families with this program.

For more information on the Adoption Ambassador Program, please call Griselda Garcia in PRU at (626) 938-1729. 📞

Luncheon Highlights Family Search Successes

The Los Angeles Training Consortium (LATC), a collaboration of Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services, Hathaway-Sycamores Child and Family Services, Star View Children and Family Services and the San Fernando Valley Community Mental Health Services, Inc., recently partnered with DCFS to hold an informal luncheon highlighting two successful cases that resulted from the consortium's Family Search and Engagement (FS&E) Project.

In one case, a teen girl is being reunited with her mother who has turned her life around and a young boy has been reunited with a cousin who was considered too young to care for him at the time he was removed from his parents.

Initially, each LATC agency selected a youth to participate along with staff members who knew the youth as well as supportive trainers. Since last year, the teams have worked diligently to help these children with the underlying theme of "Home for the Holidays."

The training program started with the child's family tree, which illustrated connections that the child knew or remembered throughout their life. Most of these trees began the project quite barren. By working with the children and following FS&E searching techniques most of these trees bloomed beyond belief. By the time the luncheon was held, 70 staff members had been trained and 29 youth had been identified for the project. 📞

Pomona Office Continues its Outreach

The Pomona DCFS Office is continuing its community outreach by having monthly Pomona Community Council meetings and four Annie E. Casey Foundation Core Groups, which meet monthly to plan ways to further develop community partnerships.

Other efforts to build community support included a recent invitation breakfast held with the faith-based community. The office is working with the faith-based community to plan a strategic event to discuss ways to learn and serve each other in the department's goal to strengthen families in our communities.

In addition, last fall the Pomona Office opened its doors and invited the community for a visit. All staff came together to prepare for this event by making food, decorating and conducting tours. It could only have been accomplished thanks to everyone's collaboration.

Sixty-seven guests comprised of community service providers, resource parents, city officials and community members were treated to a facility tour and a buffet lunch. Major units were toured including Emergency Response, Family Maintenance/Family Reunification, generic case units, the Pomona Family First program, Dependency

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SPA SPOTS

Continued



Investigation and Team Decision-Making.

At the end of the tour and lunch there was a wealth of information offered from our direct DCFS service providers including Family Preservation agencies, the DCFS Education and Mentoring Section, Kinship Resource Family Support Group, the Spanish and English Kinship Support Group and the DCFS Adoptions Section.

To say the least, the Pomona staff was pleasantly surprised by the community response. The office plans on continuing to build community support so that they can continue to share their successes and needs. 🍀

Education and Mentoring Section Revamps and Expands

Numerous and exciting changes at DCFS are expected over the next few years in the area of child education and mentoring.

Jennifer Hottenroth has been selected as the new Assistant Division Chief to oversee the Education and Mentoring Section. An initial plan is underway to provide 15 Education Consultants for 19 regional DCFS offices to assist social workers and caregivers with the various educational issues associated with foster youth.

The DCFS mentoring program is getting a big boost with \$2.5 million from the State augmentation funds. Community Based Mentoring Programs have the capacity to match, train, and supervise a minimum of 800 mentors and mentees. Additionally, DCFS is contracting for five Academic Mentoring Programs within Los Angeles County that have the capacity to oversee 150 middle school youth residing in foster care and their mentors. It is anticipated that these programs will be up and running by this summer.

The DCFS Torrance office has been hard at work on its mentoring program. With a cross section of community partners, including mentoring agencies like Peace4Kids, Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services (GLASS), and other agencies entering into mentoring for the first time, the South Bay Mentor Coalition is launching its 2007 implementation plan.

Working with such expert partners like M-Play and the

State's EMT technical consultants, the Coalition is implementing a community-based mentoring program. Community partners will be creating and overseeing mentor matches with the DCFS Torrance Office's South Bay foster youth. These partners have committed to make 18 mentor matches with local older foster youth ages 14 years and older. The matches will focus on non-group home foster youth since the South Bay area has very few group homes.

DCFS is also collaborating with State and Regional Center representatives and community partners to develop an implementation plan for the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). The new focus will be on screening all young children, birth to 36 months, with substantiated child abuse or neglect concerns, for indicators of developmental delays.

A systematic process will be established to refer the child to Regional Center for a comprehensive assessment to determine their eligibility and provide services through the Early Start Program.

The department is also committed to increasing the number of children participating in quality preschool programs. DCFS is working with the Education Coordinating Council, First 5 LA, LAUP, County Child Care and others to connect community resources with caregivers.

There is also an ongoing promotion to enroll all DCFS supervised children in the public school free and reduced Title I lunch programs, as the gateway to free tutoring opportunities. In September, students enrolled in Program Improvement Schools and participating in the free and reduced lunch programs can sign-up for tutoring through the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The age-appropriate standards and guidelines for early childhood, school-aged children, high school, special education students, and youth transitioning to adulthood have been finalized. The information includes the educational needs of children under the supervision of DCFS and the roles of the social worker, caregiver, youth and others as they interact with the schools to access a quality education. Details for all these programs can be found on L.A. Kids and the Los Angeles County web site. 🍀

Augmentation Funds Update

State Augmentation Money Intended to Reduce Caseloads

As a result of AB 1808, the State Budget Trailer Bill, DCFS will be receiving approximately \$22.8 million in state Services Outcome Improvement Project (SOIP) augmentation funding.

The Legislature's primary intent in providing this funding is to reduce social work staff caseloads and provide additional clerical and paraprofessional support staff.

The State Budget Trailer Bill also allows the funding to be used for other activities such as the support of local priorities, which have been identified in the individual County's System Improvement Plan, such as mentoring services. While the funding is not sufficient to fully implement the SB 2030 yardsticks, it will allow the department to further reduce social work staff workload by increasing clerical and paraprofessional support staff and technology.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved the planning process for use of this funding appropriation in January. For fiscal year 2006-07, the department is proposing to use about 50 percent of the funding to increase social work, clerical and paraprofessional staff. The remaining 50 percent will be used to fund one-time only costs for acquisitions such as computers, phones and other similar items for the additional staff as well as provide initial funds for some program expansion.

The mentoring program will receive \$2.5 million to expand services for DCFS and Probation youth in out-of-home care as well as youth at risk for being removed from their homes. Other programs will also be receiving additional financial support. Family

Preservation will receive \$3.8 million and the Wraparound Program will receive \$2.8 million to provide services to 170 additional clients.

Funding for Wraparound, Family Preservation programs and infrastructure upgrades are on a one-time only basis.

These funds will be redirected in the 2007-08 fiscal year to cover the costs of the additional 329 social work positions. The IV-E Waiver and MacLaren Designation funds will be used to support the Family Preservation and Wraparound program expansions. No County match is required for the Augmentation funds, and as a result, there will be no impact on the County's budget. 🍷

The \$22.8 million in funding will be broken down in the following way:

- 329 additional positions will be filled to reduce social work case loads using \$10.8 million. These additional hires will be supported with \$2.9 million in infrastructure such as computers and phones.
- The new hires will be comprised of 69 Children's Social Workers and 22 Supervising Social Workers.
- These positions will be supported by paraprofessionals including 141 Case Aids, 40 Permanency Assistants to expand Family Finding, 34 Clerk Typists, 21 Intermediate Clerks and two Eligibility Workers.

DCFS 'Family Fun Day' Coming Soon!

What could be better than spending a beautiful summer afternoon in the park with your family and colleagues? Last year's first "Family Fun Day" was a rousing success and this year's event is expected to be bigger and better. DCFS Family Fun Day will be held on **Saturday, July 14, 2007**, from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the Griffith Park Crystal Springs Picnic area. The event includes music, lots of DCFS talent, games for the entire family, activities for the children, raffle prizes and the DCFS Spirit Award. A barbecue lunch will be available for purchase in advance, or you can potluck with co-workers or bring your own picnic lunch.

If you missed the fun last year, you won't want to miss it this year. Get involved. Join your office Fun Day team and show your DCFS spirit. Hope to see you all there!

For more information and updates, please log on to the L.A. Kids web site or call Lois Shirk at (626) 938-1763. 🍷

DCFS Unveils Outreach Program to Assist Homeless Families

New Social Work Team Located Near Skid Row

In an ongoing effort to enhance services to homeless families the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has formed the Skid Row Assessment Team as part of the Skid Row Families Demonstration Project. The team is located at Union Rescue Mission, the Midnight Mission and the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health in the Skid Row area.

DCFS manages and monitors the partnership with other Los Angeles County departments and Beyond Shelter – a non-profit program that combats poverty and homelessness among families with children - to service up to 500 homeless families from Skid Row.

The 12-month pilot project will have social workers walking the streets of Skid Row to assist families in relocating from the crime-ridden and drug-infested streets. The experienced team will initially consist of two DCFS Supervising Social Workers (SCSWs) and six DCFS Children's Social Workers (CSWs). Eight additional staff will be brought on in the near future.

The project goal is to move homeless families into permanent housing in residential neighborhoods. These families are provided with needed services including job training, employment,

support training, employment, support for locating new housing and assistance with overall case management services to ensure that they do not return to homelessness.

Families in need of shelter, services or referrals are referred to DCFS, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and Los Angeles County Department of Health Services staff who are located at the Union Rescue Mission or Midnight Mission.

For more information, call Skid Row Assessment Team Manager Theresa Rupel at (213) 639-4821. 📞



The Skid Row Assessment Team meets.

ON THE LINE

“On the Line” is a “DCFS News” column featuring Los Angeles County and Family Services’ social workers whose achievements and practice epitomize the best in social work.

Skid Row Social Worker Aims to Improve Lives, One Child at a Time

“Skid Row is getting better and better day by day due to our interventions with families and children,” said Skid Row Assessment Team Children’s Social Worker (CSW) Sonny Okereke. “We (social workers) make a difference in a child’s life, one at a time.”

Okereke was one of the CSWs to join the team in November 2005. At that time, there were few protocols and procedures to guide social workers servicing Skid Row. However, Okereke found wonderful leadership in then Assistant Regional Administrator Teresa Rupel, besides relying on his own background as a Command Post CSW and a treatment worker. He describes his 15 months with the Skid Row project as great, but challenging. “Every day is a challenge. You don’t know what to expect.”

Okereke and his wife arrived in the United States from Nigeria in March 2000. He and his wife arrived as part of the United States Diversity Lottery program, an international effort to bring immigrants to the United States who specialize in particular professions.

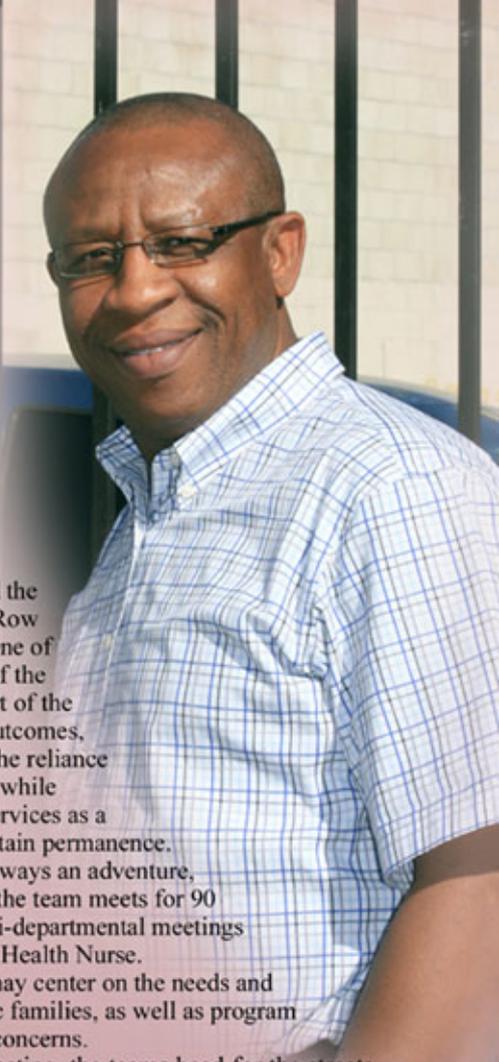
“When you come from a Third World country, you want to come to the United States,” he explains. In Nigeria, he had been a social worker. Okereke and his wife became naturalized American citizens in 2005.

In 2002, he joined DCFS, first at the Command Post, then as a treatment worker in Lancaster. Finally, he became an Emergency Response worker at Metro North before being asked to join the Skid Row Assessment Team.

Okereke’s journey to the Skid Row Assessment Team came after successfully assisting a family in need. In August 2005 Okereke serviced an emergency referral involving a family on Skid Row who had recently relocated to Los Angeles from New York. By October, Okereke had found housing for the family and was able to close the case.

“We (social workers) make a difference in a child’s life, one at a time.”

— Skid Row Assessment Team Children’s Social Worker Sonny Okereke



Rupel was so impressed with his work that she asked him to come on board the newly formed Skid Row Assessment Team. One of his favorite aspects of the program is its support of the department’s three outcomes, especially reducing the reliance on out-of-home care while providing as many services as a family needs to maintain permanence.

A typical day is always an adventure, said Okereke. First, the team meets for 90 minutes. These multi-departmental meetings also include a Public Health Nurse.

The discussions may center on the needs and challenges of specific families, as well as program challenges and staff concerns.

Following the meeting, the teams head for the streets of Downtown Los Angeles. The teams are made up of a social worker from DCFS, as well as staff from the Los Angeles County Departments of Mental Health and Public Social Services (DPSS). These roving teams are faced with the delicate task of not only identifying a possible family, but also approaching them to offer services.

This was very hard at first, said Okereke. But over time, the teams have gotten better at identifying needy families. DPSS approaches first and offers resources. If a family has a DPSS case and had exhausted these services, additional services are looked into.

An informal assessment continues on the street. This includes checking if the family has an open Cal Works case or has had any interaction with DCFS. Further checks are also made via a portable laptop. The teams used to walk all day, but now they climb aboard an unmarked van that allows them to expand their outreach. The vans also help transport families to shelters and welfare offices.

Sonny Okereke said he sees himself doing this job for a long time. He balances his work with a full personal life that includes spending time with his wife, eating out, going to the movies, reading and watching the Lakers. 🏀

July Implementation Date Set for Waiver

The Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project is expected to be submitted to the State for approval by the end of April and implementation is slated for July. Once approved by the state, the project will enable the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Los Angeles County Department of Probation to fundamentally change the way services are provided for children in placement or at risk of placement.

In April, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved the Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project plan that will provide millions of dollars in flexible funding for Los Angeles County to be used in part to further develop proactive up-front preventative services for children and families. The waiver will also provide the funding for additional intensive services to support the timely reunification or an alternative permanency plan for children currently in foster care.

Traditionally, Los Angeles County has been limited by strict federal funding guidelines to provide services to children based on funding eligibility, which oftentimes is not in line with the needs of children and families. In the past, DCFS has relied primarily on the removal of children from the home, which has been the primary use of IV-E assistance funds.

Under the waiver, DCFS will be able use the IV-E funds whether or not the child is removed from the home. In addition, the waiver will allow for

flexibility to use the funds to provide direct services not currently funded by IV-E based on each family's individual needs to ensure that children remain safely in their family of origin, are reunified sooner, or an alternative permanency plan is achieved timely. The Title IV-E funding is expected to result in a shift in thinking and practices away from removal as the safest and best alternative for children. The focus will be on keeping children safely in their own home whenever possible by providing community-based services.

Planning for the waiver included an intensive series of workgroups and meetings held last year. The information gathered was fed into four workgroups established in 2004 at the request of the Board of Supervisors and co-led by DCFS and the Commission for Children and Families.

The workgroups focus on prevention, reunification, permanency (older youth/court) and permanency (relative and Kinship care). The workgroups were expanded to include input from Probation, local planning groups, community stakeholders and service delivery staff.

Overall, 200 strategies were discussed. Based on feedback, the 200 ideas were narrowed down to 46 then to about 20 and then finally to eight priority initiatives the department will target once the waiver funding arrives.

In March, DCFS Deputy Director Lisa Parrish was appointed in the temporary role of IV-E Waiver Project Coordinator. 🍷

Eight DCFS Waiver Priority Initiatives

- ✓ Implementation of a County-wide Prevention Initiative focusing on locally based continuums of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention services and supports.
- ✓ Expansion of Family Team Decision-Making.
- ✓ Expansion of Family Finding including expanding the use of technology such as U.S. Search to find family members.
- ✓ Establishment of up-front mental health, domestic violence and substance abuse assessment system.
- ✓ Expansion of Family Preservation Services.
- ✓ Recruitment, development and utilization of community-based placements.
- ✓ Parent-child visitation enhancements including plans to bring in more staff to serve as trained monitors to assist social workers with visits.
- ✓ Utilization of aftercare support services.

Family Bed Safety

In this issue of "DCFS News," DCFS Medical Director Dr. Charles Sophy discusses the issue of parents or caretakers sharing the bed with their young children and infants -- also known as the "family bed."

DCFS News:

Why do parents choose to share their beds with their young children or infants?

Dr. Sophy:

Parents choose to share their beds for many different reasons. Some may have to do with cultural preferences, economic or financial burden. Or, it may be simply because they like to feel close to their children.

DCFS News:

What are some of the benefits and risks associated with the family bed?

Dr. Sophy:

There are many benefits of sharing the family bed, depending on the age of your child. For example, newborns tend to need more nurturing during the sleeping hours and often it is easier for parents to reach over, than to get up and walk down the hall. At times this is magnified if there are several children in the house and mom and dad are just plain tired. From the emotional standpoint, the closeness felt by the child and parent is many times the best time to nurture and bond.

There are risks, however. When we fall asleep we are not in control of our body movements and oftentimes a hand or a leg weigh more pounds than the total weight of the child. As our arms and legs move, so do our blankets and pillows, all of which are a risk to children. Also, bed placement in the room can offer another risk as small bodies can slip between walls and furniture from in the bed, frequently without the child or the parents being aware, due to their own sleep state. Another significant risk to children is any residue that may be on our hands, feet or other body parts such as faces or mouths, as they pose a risk to newborn children who reach to their parents and may want to touch or be in physical contact with them.

DCFS News:

How can social workers educate their clients?

Dr. Sophy:

Social workers need to be able to assess their families with an open mind and open heart, realizing that the very fact that we are in their home, creates feelings for them and possible defenses. Therefore, starting with a tone of voice that is open and non-threatening, as well as, body language is half the battle. During their questioning, asking questions as to where household members sleep, and with whom, and also addressing any cultural values will help the social worker put together the puzzle. It will help assist them in making the next appropriate decision. 🍷

The Doctor Is In ... Safety Guidelines

Use a firm mattress. A soft mattress can result in infant suffocation.

There should be no gaps between the mattress and the frame of the crib or bed. Infants and small children can become wedged in gaps and asphyxiate.

Bedding should fit tightly around the mattress.

Avoid strings or ties on all nightclothes (both baby's and parents'). These pose a strangulation risk.

Avoid soft bedding.

Keep baby's face uncovered to allow ventilation.

Put baby on his or her back to sleep. Babies sleeping on their backs are less likely to become victims of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Adults should avoid smoking. Exposure to tobacco, both pre- and post-delivery, is associated with a higher risk of SIDS.

Avoid overheating the room in which the baby sleeps and avoid overdressing the baby.

Avoid placing a crib near window treatment cords or sashes. These pose a strangulation risk.

Adults using alcohol or other drugs, those taking over-the-counter or prescription medication that may cause them to sleep too soundly, and those suffering from extreme exhaustion should not bedshare. Such adults may not be aware of the baby, creating a risk of overlying and suffocation.

Head/foot board railings should have spaces no wider than those allowed in safety-approved cribs.

Do not bedshare in a waterbed. The surface of a waterbed can prevent ventilation if baby moves to a face down position.

Avoid placing an adult bed directly alongside furniture or a wall.

Do not sleep with baby on sofas or overstuffed chairs and do not put baby to sleep alone in an adult bed.



DIRECTOR'S EMPLOYEES OF THE MONTH

Every month, DCFS employees are honored as part of the "DCFS All Stars" employee recognition program. All of these employees are honored for enriching the lives of the children and families and contributing to our goals of permanence, safety and reduced reliance on out-of-home care. Recipients are chosen by a rotating panel of all levels of DCFS staff and given special certificates. Photos of all recipients are also mounted on the wall outside of the Director's office at DCFS Headquarters and posted on L.A. Kids. We're still looking for "DCFS All Stars" to honor and all staff are encouraged to send in nominations using the form on the L.A. Kids web site.

For more information, call Lois Shirk in the DCFS Office of Public Affairs at (213) 351-5886. To learn more about these outstanding recipients, check out the Director's Page on L.A. Kids. Congratulations to all of the honorees!

Outstanding Administrative Service Staff Award

October: Faustino (Tito) Barin, Assistant Division Chief, Budget Services
November: Corey Hanemoto, CSA I, Concurrent Planning, Pasadena Office
December: No nominees

Outstanding Direct Service Staff Award

October: Imelda Landaverde, CSW III, Palmdale Office
November: Leticia Quezada, SCSW, Santa Fe Springs Office
December: No nominees

Outstanding Support Service Staff

October: Marilyn Brooks, Senior Typist Clerk, Lakewood Office
November: No nominees
December: No nominees

Outstanding Team Award

October: No nominees
November: DCFS Public Health Nurses-North Area (N.H. Santa Clarita, Palmdale, Lancaster offices)
December: No nominees

UPCOMING EVENTS

**Celebration 2007:
Honoring the Academic
Achievements of
Foster Youth**
Wednesday, June 6, 2007
6 p.m.
Walt Disney Concert Hall
Information: (213) 351-0102
This annual gala
commencement ceremony
honors more than 100
graduating foster youth for
their academic
accomplishments. All youth
attending the ceremony
receive scholarships.

15th Annual Animagination Art Festival

Saturday, June 16, 2007
9:30 a.m.

20th Century Fox Studios
This event exposes foster
youth to artistic careers
through a day of creativity
led by professionals.

DCFS 'Family Fun Day' Employee Picnic

Saturday, July 14, 2007

11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Griffith Park, Crystal
Springs Picnic Area
Information: L.A. Kids or
(626) 938-1763

Bring your family and join
fellow DCFS staff for a day
of fun including games for
the entire family, special
activities for children,
music, DCFS talent and
raffles. Employees can
purchase a barbecue lunch
in advance, potluck with
their office or bring their
own picnic. Plenty of free
parking will be available.
All DCFS staff and their
families are welcome.

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L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services

425 Shatto Place
Los Angeles, CA 90020
www.lacdfs.org
www.lacounty.info

Child Protection Hotline
1-800-540-4000
Adoptions and Foster Care
Information 1-888-811-1121

Director
Patricia S. Ploehn, LCSW

DCFS News Staff

Editor
Louise Grasmehr

Writer
Stu Riskin

Editorial Assistants
Gino Hernandez, Lois Shirk

Photography and Graphic Design
Richard Cervantes

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