

With will and effort to recuperate her children

Lilian Peña regained custody of her six children after meeting court ordered requirements; she is one of thousands of mothers who face similar custody issues.



Lilian Peña's six children are now by her side. For two months, Peña took classes on how to be a better mom and how to control her anger. In addition, she separated from the father of one of her daughters who mistreated her in the presence of her little ones.

"The judge told me very clearly what I needed to do to get my children back and I did so immediately. I went to court on a Tuesday and by the following week I was enrolled in classes on how to be a better mom. I learned many things that prior to this I had no knowledge of and now I am able to greatly enjoy my children. Now my 11-year-old daughter talks to me and my four-year-old son hugs me and tells me he loves me," said Peña who is satisfied with her new life.

She did everything the court ordered for her to be with her children and yesterday, at the start of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Family Reunification Week, Peña received a certificate honoring her as one of their success stories.

"Many mothers who have lost their children (under DCFS) ask me how I regained my children so quickly. I tell them court orders a list of things you have to do as a mother and I did everything they asked to the letter. The judge told me either leave the father of your daughter, or we take your children, I left him immediately. Nothing is more important to me than my children," she said with a firm voice.

For the longest time, the father of Peña's youngest daughter terrorized her and her children. The children referred to him as the "ogre" and trembled at the sight of him.

"He would shake me and push me in their presence," she recalled.

Now her life is different, there is no screaming or crying. Instead there are smiles, hugs and many words of encouragement as ensured by Peña and Joana Rodriguez, the family preservation social worker who participated in the development family plan.

"I'm Lilian's counselor and have worked with her for almost a year... there have been many challenges, she was even homeless for a month, but working together we managed to get her life in order with her children," said Rodriguez.

Tania Benacerraf, coordinator with Pico-Union Family Preservation Network that operates from California Hospital, explained her program helps about 80 families annually referred by DCFS.

"We listen to families and help them set goals— their goals. Each family is different and their goals depend on their strengths and weaknesses," explained Benacerraf. For some families, the goal may be to eliminate family violence, while for others; it is spending more time with their children.

DCFS statistics indicate that about 6,000 children, temporarily separated from their parents, are returned [annually] to their homes after their parents complied with the Juvenile Court orders.

Laura Cutler, a manager with the DCFS Family Preservation Program, explained DCFS' objective is to reunify families and work together with parents to eliminate the issues that brought them into foster care.

In some cases, the list of family problems includes drug abuse or alcoholism, in others it is neglect or domestic violence.

It is expected that this week Philip Browning, Director of the Department of Social Services, will assume responsibilities as Interim Director of DCFS. He will become the fourth Interim Director in less than a year.

This local agency has been highly criticized by LA County officials due to a number of child fatalities recorded while children were under DCFS custody or under investigation.

During this week, dozens of families will be reunited in ceremonies in different parts of LA County.