

Family reunification needs the public's involvement, respect and support

By Michael Nash and Margaret Henry

The child welfare system in our country and here in Los Angeles has, thankfully so, had a greater spotlight on it over the last decade. Unfortunately, that spotlight has often led to a one-sided and, often times, negative perspective of the child welfare system. Many view the system as filled primarily with horribly abusive parents who kill and maim their children. Some see the foster care system as broken, which protects children from immediate harm, but then fails to provide them with the stability and permanency they need, leaving them to face broken lives forever. Occasionally, we hear about great stories like Adoption Saturday where children, many of whom are considered less broken, are adopted by "good families."

While no system, especially, one helping families in crisis and children in peril, is perfect, the child welfare system also plays a much needed and positive side. First and foremost, the system is designed to keep children safe from physical and emotional harm. There are 26,000 children currently under our court's jurisdiction in Los Angeles County due to abuse and/or neglect. While one is too many, the number of those children who are harmed or in unsafe situations while under our care is statistically low. However, those of us who work in child welfare understand that there is no margin for error and we must be constantly vigilant to keep children safe, regardless of where they are placed.

In addition to safety, our system is also expected to meet all the physical, developmental, and emotional needs of every child involved including health, mental health, education issues and more. Over the last decade, we have made significant progress in developing better programs to help meet these needs, but we still need more. Unfortunately, today's budgetary climate makes that challenge even greater.

Ultimately, the goal of the system is permanence. Every child has the right to grow up in a safe, healthy, loving and permanent home. In establishing permanence, the preference is that it occurs with the child's own family, not through foster care. Foster care, by definition, should only be used as a temporary place for children to stay until we establish safe permanence. There are essentially three reasons for the preference for family. First, every child, and every human being has a fundamental need to 'belong' and we all recognize that families, the cornerstone of our society, is where the sense of belonging begins. Second, the laws that cover our child welfare system, at both the state and federal levels, clearly indicate that the focus of the system shall be on the preservation of the family, as well as the safety, protection, physical and emotional well-being of the child. Third, when it comes to reunification, the system actually accomplishes that more often than not. Of the 26,000 plus children under our court's jurisdiction today, almost 15,000 are either being safely maintained at home or are in a reunification plan with their

families. From 2003 through 2009, more than 40,000 children were reunified with their families in Los Angeles County, an average of almost 6,000 a year. By the same token, Los Angeles has received acclaim for its successful adoption program which has averaged slightly more than 2,000 adoptions per year.

Each year in Los Angeles, and throughout the country, we observe Child Abuse Awareness Month, Foster Care Awareness Month and Adoption and Permanency Month. There has been little fanfare and celebration around family reunification. That is about to change in Los Angeles County. Our Board of Supervisors will declare the week of September 12th to be 2011 Family Reunification Week. During that week, we will celebrate those families who, through their own hard work and with the assistance of the many dedicated social workers and others, have successfully overcome the ills that brought them into the child welfare system and are moving on with their lives in a safe and healthy manner. We will also celebrate individuals and programs that have contributed to family reunification in a positive way.

Through Family Reunification Week, we hope to inform the public that, despite its shortcomings, the child welfare system often does what it's supposed to do, that is to serve as a child-centered, family-serving institution, designed to bring hope and not despair to families. The child welfare system is an institution which is critical to the well-being of children, families, communities and our society in general. It needs the public's involvement, respect and support as it attempts to deal with the many complex issues that plague our children, the most vulnerable and important members of our community.

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