

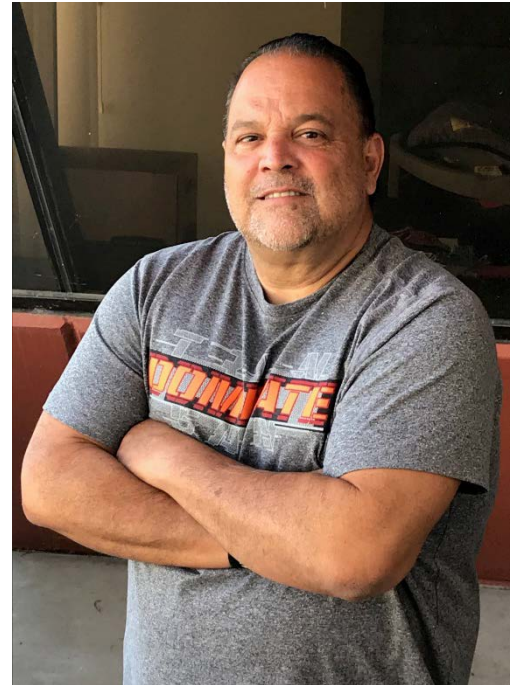


David Cantu grew up wanting to help people. A career in social work, therefore, was a natural fit.

But it wasn't until 2013 that he realized precisely where he needed to be. After more than 25 years in social work, it was the gut-wrenching murder of 8-year-old Gabriel Fernandez in the Antelope Valley that compelled David to take up work in the community where he was raised.

"I needed to come back to the Antelope Valley because I knew at that moment I could make a difference in a child's life," he said.

David has a strong attachment to the area and cares deeply for the wellbeing of the children and families who live there. David and others like him are a part of a major reform effort by DCFS, following two additional child deaths, to provide enhanced services to a remote part of the county where families struggle financially and often are unaware of available resources or how to access them.



Deputy Director Frank Ramos also is part of the team mobilized to effect change. His job is to recruit and retain the best and brightest, reduce caseloads and expand capacity at the Palmdale and Lancaster offices. The department also has taken steps to offer more training, expand mentoring and coaching, and encourage frequent and open dialogue between staff and supervisors.

"DCFS can't do this alone," said Frank, a veteran social worker who recognizes the need for multidisciplinary partners who can step in to provide children and families with more specialized support. "It really does take a village."

Currently, Frank is in discussions with five Antelope Valley school districts, comprised of 14 locations, where the department seeks to launch a pilot program that would embed social workers on school campuses. The objective of the program is to strengthen relationships with school personnel, to work directly with children and youth, and to augment the department's ability to respond quickly and effectively.

Frank can attest that even a global pandemic has not derailed the work. The department remains focused on identifying and correcting systemic deficiencies and investing in resources and cross-sector partnerships that aim to improve outcomes for children and families.

Among them, Frank and others are working to strengthen ties with public officials, law enforcement and educational institutions. The latter is for the purpose of creating a pipeline of emotionally-vested, highly trained public servants who want to dedicate their careers to serving children and families.

In addition to building workforce capacity and improving relationships with community partners, efforts in the Antelope Valley moving forward also will focus on promoting equity and family engagement.

Frank and David both agree that the key ultimately is to have honest and open conversations, and to really listen to the community. “The Antelope Valley is a unique and wonderful place,” Frank said. “We must listen to families, engage them and work with them to enhance safety for children.”



Watch Frank deliver the Child Abuse Hotline public service announcement in [Spanish](#). The PSA is also available for you to watch and share in [English](#), [Vietnamese](#), [Tagalog](#), [Japanese](#), [Korean](#), [Traditional Chinese](#) and [Simplified Chinese](#).

Report Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect to
800-540-4000