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STATEMENT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES ON “THE TRIALS OF GABRIEL FERNANDEZ” NETFLIX DOCUMENTARY SERIES

“Los Angeles County, and specifically the Antelope Valley community, have lived with the awful tragedy of Gabriel Fernandez’s death for the last seven years. What happened to Gabriel was horrific and inhumane; no child should ever suffer such abuse and neglect at the hands of a caregiver.

“It should never take the death of a child to address weaknesses and make investments in improvements for child protection; it is in his memory and in pursuit of the safety of Los Angeles County’s two million children that we have reformed how child protection work is done. This new era of reform began immediately following Gabriel’s death and continues on today with Director Bobby D. Cagle who joined the Department in December 2017.

“DCFS has, and continues to, implement many reforms to increase child safety and enhance our work with supporting at-risk families and those in crisis. We were in contact with the producers and director of the documentary about Gabriel’s death beginning in 2018 and through 2019. In that time, we had several phone conversations where we answered questions; exchanged emails providing information; provided access to film a ride-along with a social worker in Palmdale; provided access to film a ride-along with an Emergency Response Command Post social worker; secured an interview with Division Chief Ed Fithyan, and a tour of the Child Protection Hotline that was filmed.

“It is important for the public not only to understand the circumstances that led up to Gabriel’s death, as shown in heartbreaking detail in the Netflix documentary series, but also the reforms that have been enacted since. These reforms include but are not limited to:

- Hiring 3,573 new social workers since 2013. This expansion means lower caseloads for workers.
- Achieving a 5:1 ratio of supervisors to social workers; the Antelope Valley offices currently have a ratio lower than this.

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- Implementing a plan to station social workers at 14 community schools in the Antelope Valley, expected to launch in April 2020, with the goal to ultimately roll out Countywide.
- Implementing a Criminal Clearance Tracking System to enable social workers in the field to use mobile devices to immediately access basic criminal history data in abuse or neglect cases.
- Developing and investing in new social work trainings, including simulation labs and experiential learning;
- Retraining workers on how to interview witnesses, recognition of physical injuries, when to use forensic exams, and how to handle a child's recanted allegations.
- Dispatching a Deputy Sheriff and social worker together on calls that involve suspected child abuse or neglect.
- Co-locating DCFS workers in several County Sheriff's patrol stations to further build our relationships with law enforcement and collaborate in connecting families to critical resources.
- Instituting a Continuous Quality Improvement team to help identify concerns and possible systemic issues early.
- ⊖ Increasing use and adoption of technology tools that help social workers complete more rapid review of extensive case histories.

"DCFS and its 9,000 staff across LA County's 4,000 square miles remains dedicated to our mission that every child deserves to grow up in a safe, loving, and stable home."

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