



When Tania Cendejas rolls out to investigate, there are no sirens or back up units. She’s a different type of emergency responder. Tania is one of more than 800 DCFS emergency response social workers who – day or night – respond to allegations of child abuse or neglect received by the Child Protection Hotline.

As an emergency response social worker, Tania leans on her own experience in the child welfare system to guide her approach when gathering facts and interviewing children and families. A challenging assignment on the best of days, the work is now increasingly delicate with coronavirus concerns and public health guidelines informing every steps.

But Tania is unshakeable and, in the midst of a global pandemic, she and others have leveled up. The coronavirus is simply one more risk factor on top of many that she and her colleagues see daily. “I’m reminded that, the day I was hired, I took an oath to serve the greater Los Angeles area, in good times and bad,” Tania said. “This is what public service is about.”

While thousands of county employees have transitioned to telework to slow the spread of the virus, social workers have never stopped making in-person visits. DCFS policy calls for in-person child abuse investigations to assess the safety of children and support families.

Although, at the outset of the pandemic, federal, state and local orders prompted the department to modify monthly contact practices to include virtual visitation, monthly in-person visits resumed last month with virtual platforms now used as supplemental tools.

Child welfare experts agree that speaking with children face-to-face, and away from parents or caretakers, is the best way to assess a child’s safety and living situation.

Despite anemic hotline numbers, between March and June, emergency response social workers received more than 10,000 referrals that required in-person investigations involving some 20,000 children.



To date, 98 percent of all DCFS-supervised children have had either virtual or in-person contact with their social worker, depending on risk. The department projects that, by the end of July, all 36,000 children under the department’s purview will have been seen in-person.

While the pandemic hasn’t changed the fundamental nature of the job for those working in child welfare, the heightened health risk has changed the approach. To avoid falling ill or exposing children and families to the virus, social workers now closely follow recommended safety protocols when responding to hotline referrals or conducting visits.

This includes the use of personal protective equipment for all parties involved, disinfecting surfaces, practicing good hygiene and social

distancing. Despite the added personal risk and new protocols, however, Tania remains steadfast in her determination to help children and passionate about giving back to the system that worked for her.

As a young child, Tania spent five years in foster care before being adopted when she was 7 years old. She attributes her inspiration and drive for the profession to the supportive social workers who impacted her life.

“If you would have told me in school that I was going to graduate, get the job I wanted and that it would be hard, I would’ve said, ‘Ok,’ Tania reflected. “If somebody said, ‘We’re going to add a global health crisis and civil unrest, are you still interested?’ I would still say, ‘Yes.’ Every time.”

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

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