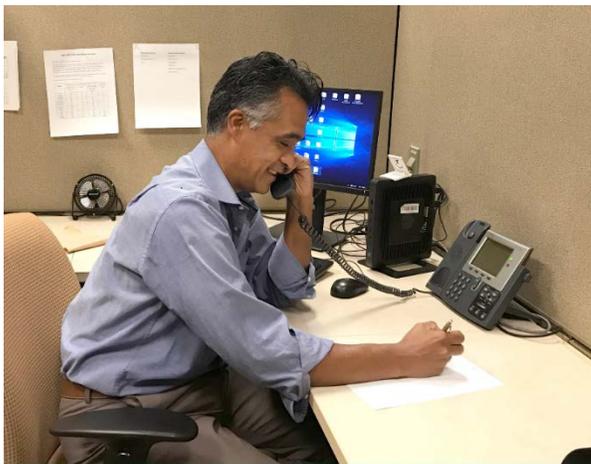




Family well-being experts largely agree that, when it is safe, children should remain home with their biological families for the best long-term outcomes. As such, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) works diligently to connect children and parents with prevention services that unify and strengthen families.

At times, however, it is in the best interest of a child to be placed outside of the home while parents work toward reunification and improve their protective capacities.



Carlos Urueta, Supervising Children's Social Worker

Carlos Urueta explains that, in those instances, the best option is to place children with a relative caregiver in order to maintain a family connection but finding extended family members can sometimes be difficult. Fortunately, the Upfront Family Finding (UFF) program is there help.

“Finding relatives for kids in foster care seemed like a no-brainer to me when I first started doing this work,” said Carlos, a supervisor in the Glendora office. “However, this is easier said than done – especially as time passes and cases continue for extended periods of time. Sadly, sometimes we are unable to help youth maintain family ties.”

The program seeks to keep children out of foster care and in situations that call for a child to be placed with foster parents, that the duration be abridged.

Carlos oversees a UFF team with a high success rate of finding relatives.

“These children are in an unfortunate situation already, and we do everything in our power to get them closer to family and help make them as comfortable as possible,” he said.

Before UFF, the department’s Permanency Partners Program (P3) had helped more than 15,000 children and youth, most ages 12 to 18, establish family connections over a 15-year period. P3, however, focused on “long-staying” youth who had been in care for three or more years. The UFF program evolved from P3 and initiates family finding within days of children coming into care.

First implemented in 2016 in partnership with the Office of Child Protection, the UFF program began in two DCFS offices with the purpose of providing intensive family finding services.

UFF social workers, most of whom are retired, part-time employees, partner with primary staff to enhance existing family finding efforts from the time of initial contact. They identify and engage relatives and non-relative extended family members, like a close family friend or other adult who has a mentoring relationship with the child, to see how they might be able to support the child or youth, including serving as a temporary or permanent placement option.

Not only is it challenging to identify and engage extended family, the multicultural makeup of Los Angeles County sometimes leads UFF social workers to other countries including Mexico, Central and South America.

Francisco Vazquez, a bilingual retired social worker who works part-time with the UFF program in the Santa Fe Springs office, has engaged many family members beyond the US border in his efforts to find the best placements for children and youth.

“When I started with UFF I had no idea the journey I was about to embark on,” he said. “I enjoy engaging with people and this has been really rewarding work in that respect. There are so many faces to the human experience, and interviewing family members from different places to try and make connections has really been an eye opener.”

Francisco also notes that connecting with family early can shorten the court process and foster a more comfortable dynamic for children and parents.



Francisco Vazquez, Children's Social Worker

UFF has now expanded to 10 DCFS offices, including Lakewood, the west San Fernando Valley and Santa Clarita. As of December 2019, the program has helped about 1,000 children connect with family. Nearly a quarter of these children and youth were moved out of foster care and placed with a relative caregiver or non-relative extended family member and 12 percent were reunited with a parent within 90 days.

Altogether, UFF has helped to identify nearly 7,000 relatives and non-relative extended family members who want to serve as a support to the youth or child and parents.

“There’s nothing you can do to change what these kids have gone through, but we can try to make things better,” Carlos said. “The more time a child is away from family, the less connected they feel, so intervening early helps us minimize the trauma and impact to the child. By engaging right away, we’re striking while the iron is hot when extended family is more open to becoming involved.”

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

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