



Research and sound judgment indicate that a stable and nurturing family home is essential for a child’s healthy development. Even in cases where out-of-home placement is unavoidable, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) makes every effort to help children and youth maintain their connections to existing support networks like extended family and other individuals who care about their well-being.

“More relative placements are always a good thing,” said Derrick Perez-Johnson, manager of the Kinship Support Services (KSS) section at DCFS. “But we also need to make sure that youth in kinship care get the same level

of support as those not placed with relatives.”

September is recognized nationally as Kinship Care Month, and like many child welfare agencies, DCFS recognizes the benefits of family connections for youth who are removed from the home. Recent years have seen greater efforts to engage relative caregivers through programs like the Permanency Partners Program and Upfront Family Finding, leading to an increase in the number of children who are placed with extended family members rather than in foster homes or congregate care.

Seeking out kinship placements allows children and youth to maintain family and cultural connections. Relatives are generally already invested in a child’s growth and development, and these connections help give children a sense of security and stability during a volatile and emotional time.

It isn’t enough, however, just to place children with family. DCFS strives to achieve permanency for children and youth, whether that means successful reunification with their parents or formal adoption by another caring adult. To accomplish this, the department must ensure that relative caregivers have the tools and support that they need to help the child thrive.

Support services range broadly and include school and recreational activities, as well as counseling, tutoring, mentoring, child care referrals, legal and financial assistance. The section has also increased efforts to ensure connectivity and assist caregivers with the use of computers, allowing them to engage with schools and monitor grades and other educational goals more effectively. Although this work did not start with the onset of the pandemic, it has certainly highlighted the need to help caregivers become more familiar and comfortable with technology.

A key component of this work is helping caregivers become better at engaging both the youth and biological parents, such as encouraging innovative approaches to visitation, improving communication skills or facilitating special events that foster connection. By doing so, the caregivers can work in partnership with the parents to focus on things that contribute to stability and permanency goals.

KSS staff work closely with community-based organizations across the county to support the needs of relative caregivers. The department previously operated two service centers in the county that provided kinship support but moved to contract these services out in 2016. As a result, DCFS now partners with [10 community providers](#) to operate 11 service centers across LA County, working hand-in-hand to provide resources specifically geared toward relative placements. This has increased the number of kinship caregivers and children that the department can help support, as well as making these services more cost effective.

Working with kinship caregivers takes a specific mindset and KSS is passionate about helping these individuals.

“There’s just something about working with kin,” Derrick said. “Most of our staff specifically sought out this work and are deeply committed to helping these types of caregivers. Our mission is to mitigate the challenges to ensure more successful kinship placements, and watching kids move toward stability and hold on to their family systems simultaneously is great to see.”



The Kinship Support Services team and community partners participated in a team building activity to strengthen working relationships (pre-pandemic).

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