



Veteran Social Worker Eric Ball didn't grow up in foster care but he sees a lot of himself in the young men and women whom he and his team seek to help by way of the Runaway Outreach Unit (ROU).

"I had a wayward childhood myself," said Eric, who is the ROU manager. "But I was fortunate to have people who helped me through troubling times and I knew early on that I wanted to work with these kids to offer that same support."

Eric, who has been with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) for 27 years, explains that during his time doing this type of work he has found that youth living in foster care at times feel the need to create a life separate from the constraints of the foster care system.

Like all teenagers and young adults, youth in foster care may challenge authority and crave greater independence. As such, it is not uncommon for young men and women to abandon a system they don't feel is working for them. In those instances, the ROU is called in to help.

Made up of seven social workers and a court liaison who together investigate, locate, place and, ultimately, stabilize disenfranchised youth, the ROU is part of the Bureau of Specialized Response Services. It provides support to children as young as 11 and non-minor dependents up to age 21. The majority of youth who come into contact with the ROU, however, tend to be between 14 and 18 years old.

Since 2009, the ROU has helped more than 3,000 youth. The average duration of a runaway episode is typically between 3 to 5 days. When youth run away, they often go to the homes of family members or friends, Eric said. Other times, however, runaways may end up on the streets or back at the home of a trusted, former foster care provider.

Because many of these young people exhibit a deep distrust in authority and the child welfare system, ROU social workers must devote a significant amount of time to building trust and rapport. As secondary caseworkers, ROU staff each manage about 50 cases at a time, working in tandem with the primary caseworkers to ensure the needs of these young people are met.

"Not everyone can work with this population," Eric said. "It really does take patience, wherewithal and life experience. There's often an internal pull that draws people to this work. In many cases, staff feel they understand these youth because of something in their own background, and they want to keep them from going through the same experiences."

This population is in a critical stage of social, emotional, mental and physical development as they transition from childhood to adulthood, according to Eric. They desire more freedom but are also

impressionable which makes them susceptible to outside influences and at risk of being exploited without adequate support.

Because of the complex needs of this population, the ROU works closely with partners throughout the county to connect youth with appropriate resources. This includes collaborating with county agencies like the Department of Mental Health and Los Angeles County Office of Education, as well as community-based organizations that offer advocacy, mental health, substance abuse and wraparound services. Staff also partner with law enforcement agencies, given the risk of runaway youth becoming victims of human trafficking.

Understanding the psychological dynamics of runaway youth helps ROU staff build supportive and mentoring relationships with these young men and women. To give them a sense of ownership, staff involve youth in decision-making, encouraging them to make their own suggestions about things such as nontraditional placements or therapeutic treatment techniques.

“Our philosophy is to meet these kids where they are,” Eric said. “They need the ability to make a few mistakes, but they also need to know that we aren’t going to give up on them.”

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-ERIC BALL, MANAGER
RUNAWAY OUTREACH UNIT

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