



DCFS AT WORK

Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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Growing up in Boyle Heights, Deputy Director Roberta Medina dreamed of working in a field that would allow her to enhance her community. After earning bachelor's and master's degrees in clinical psychology, and marriage, family and child counseling, respectively, she joined the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in 1985 as a bilingual social worker in the Belvedere office.

"It's important to me to stick to my roots and commit to paying it forward," said Roberta, who spent 12 years in that assignment, grateful that she could give back to the community that she knew and loved.

"I look back and think, 'There but for the grace of God go I,'" Roberta added. "I was fortunate to have supportive family and many mentors who opened doors for me throughout my life. It's because of their efforts that I can do this work, knowing I am making a difference for children in Los Angeles County."

During National Hispanic Heritage Month from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15, the country recognizes the contributions of generations of Hispanic and Latino Americans who have enriched our society. With the largest such population in the United States, the positive influence of the Hispanic community is more evident in Los Angeles County than most places.

In 1968, for example, thousands of Mexican American high school students in East LA led a series of walkouts—including at Garfield High School, where Roberta would graduate in 1978—to protest education inequality. These walkouts served as a catalyst for eventual system changes and positive outcomes for Hispanic and Latino students in Southern California and elsewhere.

With Mexican, Native American and Spanish heritage and a multicultural extended family, Roberta has made her own contributions to DCFS as a Latina in leadership. In addition to working in such communities as the Alameda Corridor, Torrance and Wateridge areas, Roberta also has served in the Metro North region, which provides services to inner city children and families.

During her 35 years with DCFS, Roberta has also played an important role in the development and provision of specialized services for vulnerable populations including immigrant families, deaf children and others with serious health conditions, sexually exploited youth, and families facing homelessness, among others. Roberta also is devoted to mentoring other social workers just as she was throughout her career.

Recognizing the pathways that her own education opened, she encourages staff to pursue advanced degrees and certifications where possible. While at the Belvedere office, she encouraged and supported bilingual trainee social workers to continue their



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ROBERTA MEDINA
DEPUTY DIRECTOR



educational advancement, knowing how beneficial this skill set is given the diversity of the county. She noted that the proportion of bilingual supervisors and managers has risen over the years as a result of efforts like this.

“When I first started, there wasn’t as much diversity in the workforce, especially at the leadership level,” Roberta said. “Since then, the department has really embraced diversity in hiring practices and other

supports offered to staff, and I think it’s helped us develop a leadership and managerial team that mirrors the population and reflects the diverse community we serve.”

One of her favorite DCFS events is the department’s annual Quinceañera celebration, a coming-of-age tradition that honors selected Latina foster youth who would not otherwise have this fairytale experience. According to Roberta, continuing cultural traditions through events like this helps to ground youth, remind them of their ethnic roots, encourage their dreams and connect them to the community.

Reflecting on her years of service with the department, Roberta acknowledges that the changing environment is a collective effort that is still in progress.

“My success is only possible because I could stand on the shoulders of those who came before me,” Roberta said. “Students before me walked out so that I could have more options. When I came to DCFS and saw some of my early mentors in leadership positions, it made me think ‘Maybe I can be that someday.’ Your work isn’t just for you, but also for those who look up to you. My legacy is the next generation of Latina social workers who will continue pushing for change.”

To those following in her footsteps, she offers the following words of wisdom, “Invest what you can of yourself and your passion into your work. Don’t be afraid to stretch your boundaries and step out of your comfort zone. Together we can make a difference in the lives of children and families, one task at time, one day at time.”

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