



In Mario Johnson's view, the diversity of Los Angeles County is a valuable asset that can be used to broaden horizons, expand perspectives and embrace tolerance on a wide scale. But while diversity can indeed be a strength, it also comes with responsibility to ensure that differences do not shape decision-making in a way that inhibits equity and inclusivity.

As the division chief of the Department of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) newly established Office of Equity (OOE), Mario sees his role as essential to moving the

department toward a more equitable practice across the board.

"I do this work because I'm optimistic that the move toward more equitable outcomes for children, youth and families of color is the key to helping them become stronger, promotes cultural acceptance and supports the community in caring for its members," said Mario, who recently moved to Southern California from Mississippi to guide the department's efforts to promote equity in how services are provided to children and families.

He joined DCFS in July after 13 years serving as the bureau director of Youth Transition Support Services at the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services, providing services supporting the well-being of more than 3,000 children each year.

Mario and his new team at the OOE will be a key component in efforts to build a culture of safety, equity and community throughout the department and across the county. The concept of equity is a basic building block of Invest LA, the strategic initiative that will shape the department's direction for the next five years. DCFS strives to be as effective as possible, and that requires ensuring that the department's practices are just and fair to everyone.

The cases managed by DCFS are diverse, including a wide variety of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, numerous languages, and LGBTQ+ clients, among others. Children and families deserve a child welfare workforce that is informed and ready to handle such diversity. They also deserve to have equitable access to services, which can be challenging in a large and geographically varied county.

These are some of the many issues that Mario and his team will tackle for the department. In addition, the OOE will look at the overrepresentation of children of color and LGBTQ+ youth in foster care, exploring what adjustments DCFS can make to reduce implicit bias and promote racial and cultural equity.

Implicit bias in child welfare systems contributes to deepening cultural and systemic barriers that impede quality services for children, youth and families of color.

The OOE is comprised of sections focused on Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity, improving outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth and the Women and Girls Initiative. As they work to infuse equity into the day-to-day work of DCFS, the OOE team will also serve as an oversight body to support departmental accountability.

Recent events, both locally and at the national level, have highlighted the need for open and honest dialogue when it comes to bias. According to Mario, it is more important than ever for child welfare professionals to take a holistic approach in their work. His goal is that the OOE can help the department better serve the whole person or family by understanding how their needs are driven by cultural identity.

“Ultimately, I want the OOE team to be ambassadors of hope,” Mario said. “I am confident that through ongoing collaboration and authentic engagement with staff and families, we can really connect to the soul of child well-being and be champions for civil liberties and visibility for all.”

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Mario Johnson, Division Chief
Office of Equity

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