



# DCFS AT WORK

Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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When the coronavirus pandemic hit earlier this year, Delilah Niebla knew she wanted to help those affected by the health crisis. The opportunity presented itself when the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) issued a call for Disaster Service Workers (DSWs) to assist with a new initiative for people experiencing homelessness.

A Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority initiative, Project Room Key provides shelter and regular meals for unhoused people at high-risk for severe symptoms if they contract COVID-19. This includes people over 65 and those who have underlying health conditions, including compromised immunity, respiratory issues and chronic illnesses.

“Truthfully, I didn’t really know what to expect,” said Delilah, a 10-year DCFS veteran. “During a time of global emergency, I just felt that I could have a greater impact working on the ‘front line’ directly with

people who needed help.”

With a deep desire to help and a gift for guiding others through life’s difficulties, Delilah gravitated toward roles where she felt she could make a difference. After college, while working at a domestic violence center – where many of the women she encountered had active DCFS cases – Delilah considered the possibility of putting her skillset to use at DCFS. Today, she works in the DCFS Risk Management Division as part of the team that responds to requests for records and data around child fatalities.

In May, when the call for DSWs came, Delilah temporarily set aside her day job and began working four days a week to support the needs of Project Room Key guests at a Travelodge in Artesia. The onset of the pandemic drew thousands of county employees from all walks of life to serve as DSWs.

At her Project Room Key site, Delilah was the primary point of contact for residents, many of whom were homeless because of economic instability aggravated by the pandemic. Along with three other DSWs on her shift, Delilah delivered meals and provided support if issues were raised by those staying at the hotel.

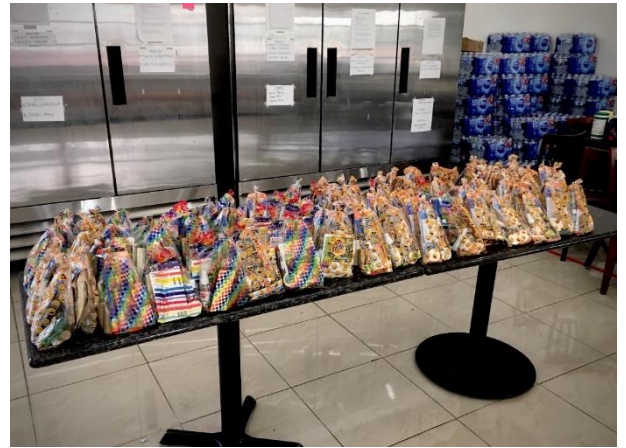
After two months, however, Delilah noticed that the extended isolation was negatively affecting the residents. While she could go home to family at the end of her shift, people at the hotel had extremely limited social interaction that weighed heavily on their mental well-being. During one shift in particular, she and the other DSWs became concerned when three separate people made comments characteristic of those experiencing depression.

“We started talking about how we could make this better for them and give them something to look forward to on a regular basis,” Delilah said.

The team soon devised a plan to boost morale and allow for interaction among the hotel residents while adhering to social distancing protocols. With full support from the community organization operating the site, and generous donations of funds and other items from each of their respective departments, the team welcomed residents to an outdoor “Safe Mingle with Bingo” event. The effort was a success, quickly becoming a regular weekly event, complete with prizes.

“Residents really started looking forward to the Sunday Bingo,” Delilah said. “This was such a fun way to give them some social interaction and still keep them safe. It was nice to see people excited about something again.”

The support for their efforts was more than Delilah and her fellow DSWs expected. They received enough donations to put together 115 hygiene kits for the hotel residents and offered daily coffee and snacks at what became known as “The RoomKey Café.”



When the assignment ended in September, Delilah returned to work feeling thankful for her experience as a DSW. The experience further cemented her conviction that social work is where she belongs.

“My background prepared me to expect the unexpected,” Delilah said. “My training and experience helped me understand where clients were coming from and how to engage them, and I was able to recognize potential issues that other DSWs might not.”

Working with Project Room Key also opened her eyes to a different perspective, serving as a reminder to not to take anything for granted.

“What I took from this experience was to have gratitude for stable employment, people I can turn to for support, and other basic things that not everyone has,” Delilah said. “This is a memory I will keep forever, and I am so grateful that I could be a part of helping this project evolve from idea to reality.”

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