



Before the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) formally existed, families often relied on help from faith communities to navigate difficult circumstances. Today, that tradition continues with DCFS and its faith-based partners working together to serve the county's most vulnerable children and families.

"The faith community has the same goal as DCFS," said Dominique Robinson, program manager for the department's Faith-Based Section. "They seek to restore and replenish families who are facing adversities and challenges in life."

The Faith-Based Section was established as a result of a motion approved by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in September 2018. While the department has always worked closely with faith partners across the county, coordinating services with a countywide perspective promotes more equitable use of resources. The section will guide the work through a cohesive approach to engaging the faith communities.

Since January, Dominique has spent time assessing the current landscape and building relationships with members of faith organizations across the county. Working closely with a faith-based consultant, she has been steadily developing and beginning to execute the collective vision of this specialized section to assist the broader efforts of DCFS.

As the section grows, its work will coincide with and reinforce the department's renewed drive to strengthen community and cross-sector partnerships. Invest LA is a strategic framework that will help DCFS determine how best to focus and invest resources to help families thrive. One of the primary tenets of this framework is recognizing that child and family well-being is a shared responsibility. Well-functioning child welfare systems are those that emphasize community engagement, collaboration and leveraging the strengths of the many sectors and stakeholder groups that support the needs of children and families.

"The faith community is eager to continue providing support for families," Dominique said. "Our faith partners are active behind the scenes and in the trenches to make dreams come true. They often address needs that we are unable to meet. It's amazing what happens when we work together."

This has largely been a planning year as the framework for the Faith-Based Section was developed, but Dominique anticipates taking steps to implement practices and additional infrastructure during 2021. In the meantime, the vision for this section is slowly taking shape.

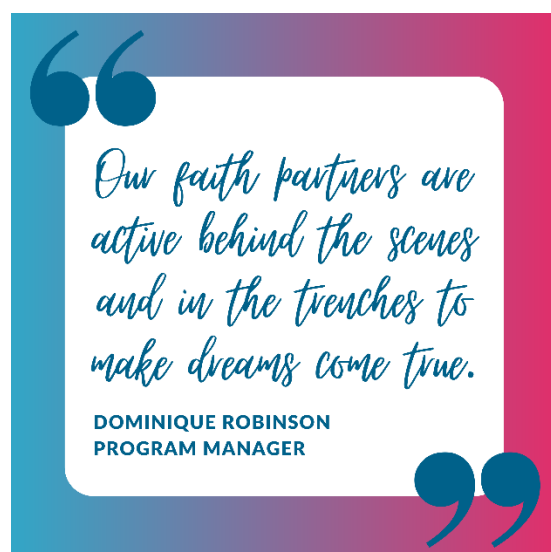
Faith-based liaisons have been identified within each DCFS regional office to focus on relationships with local faith leaders and organizations. These local partners are an invaluable resource, given how the needs of children and families can vary widely from one community to the next.

Already underway is a partnership with CarePortal, an organization that seeks to mobilize churches to help children and families in their local communities. Social workers can enter specific needs of children and families into a database, allowing local organizations to quickly respond to needs such as clothing, shoes, beds and tuition assistance.

According to Dominique, the endeavor has been successful in helping to make these connections since its limited implementation and a planned, gradual expansion to other areas of the county. The African American Community Engagement Project, supported by a motion sponsored by Los Angeles County Supervisor Hilda Solis, is another successful undertaking which provides culturally sensitive services to African American families.

Supporting families in need is a cornerstone of most faiths, and local organizations have partnered with DCFS regional offices in many ways over the years to help families during the holidays. Despite having been hit hard financially as a result of the pandemic, many churches and other organizations have stepped up in this holiday season to support gift-giving opportunities in collaboration with regional offices.

Although more limited than in previous years, these events reflect the dedication of community partners in helping to support the vulnerable children and families served by DCFS. As the Faith-Based Section ramps up its work in the coming years, Dominique hopes that she and her team will be able to play a more meaningful coordination role in these events.



Establishing a new section and building up its capabilities is challenging work, but Dominique appreciates how the process has enhanced her own understanding of child well-being systems.

"Even after 17 years with the department, getting a high-level perspective of the faith community has been a thought-provoking experience," Dominique said. "One of our goals is to identify faiths that are relatable to the children and families we serve so they can find space where they are comfortable. Understanding the universe of diverse faiths and identifying ways to engage them, especially virtually, has really challenged me to open myself up."

Dominique is not shy about expressing exactly why she does this work. She notes that her own motivations are continuously reaffirmed and strengthened through her current role working collaboratively with the faith community.

"I do this to create opportunities for growth and success for those who are often forgotten about, misunderstood or invisible," she said. "When you have the opportunity to work with groups, individuals and organizations that share the same passion, it makes the work all the more meaningful and brings you so much energy."



DCFS partnered with Shepherd Church and other sponsors to spread Christmas joy to children in foster care.

Holiday Note: The DCFS at Work newsletter will be taking a break. See you in 2021!

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