



# DCFS AT WORK

Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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**Cynthia Counts, Social Worker  
Medical Case Management Services**

Some people might find working with the Medical Case Management Services (MCMS) program at the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) overwhelming, but for social worker Cynthia Counts it feels like home.

"I grew up dealing with the issues that people with different types of disabilities face, and I love helping others, so this was a natural fit for me," said Cynthia, who has been with MCMS for all 17 years of her DCFS career and currently works with the intake unit to find placements for children and youth with special health needs.

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A program within the Health Management Services Division, MCMS provides case management services countywide to "medically fragile" children and their families. The approximately 450 children supported by MCMS have special health care needs that require additional consideration when it comes to placement and service provision. While some of these children were born with medical needs, others may have developed them after suffering from abuse or neglect.

"These kids have not only suffered trauma, they are also dealing with ongoing health needs," Cynthia said. "All of the social workers in this section are intimately familiar with the medical environment – such as dealing with big hospitals or medical teams – out of necessity due to the specific needs of the population. Finding suitable placements is challenging and sometimes takes a while, but we just have to keep going until we find something."

Cynthia also serves as the departmental liaison for 999 for Kids, a program created in 1985 through a partnership between DCFS and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD). The program

grew out of the desire for deputies to remain involved with the children whom they came into contact with during investigations and who ended up in DCFS care.

Named for the "999" law enforcement scanner code that means "urgent help needed," the program aims to support medically fragile children and youth who have been victims of abuse or neglect by providing funding for special items and services that exceed what MCMS and DCFS's Deaf Services Unit provide.

The items funded vary depending on the medical needs of each child, including items such as wheelchairs, computers and educational software, special education or theatrical classes, medically-oriented toys or games, specialty cribs or beds, walkers, tutoring sessions, clothes and camp activities.

"There are really some unique ways that we have been able to help the kids," Cynthia said. "For example, we used funds to purchase a series of DVDs to help a grandmother communicate with her deaf granddaughter who had been recently placed in her care. Another example is that we send kids dealing with diabetes to a special camp each summer where they can interact with other kids who have the same condition."

LASD raises most of the funds for the program by way of the annual Child Abuse Awareness Drive that kicks off during Child Abuse Awareness Month in April. Each LASD unit strives to raise \$999 or more through fundraisers, including barbeques, food drives and recycling. Money raised supports service requests and two annual events for DCFS children, an ice cream social in August and a holiday party in December.



In her role as program liaison and with the guidance of supervising social worker Esperanza Gonzalez who previously served in this capacity, Cynthia receives and evaluates all funding requests from caregivers and social workers. She submits requests to the 999 Committee, comprised of LASD personnel primarily from the Special Victims Bureau, which approves and authorizes the funds as appropriate.

Cynthia also works closely with her counterparts at LASD to coordinate logistics for the ice cream social and holiday party and assists LASD as needed.

Fundraising was more challenging this year due to the pandemic, and Cynthia worried that the holiday party would be canceled altogether just as the ice cream social had been in the summer. Thanks to the persistence of all involved, however, the show will go on, and children and families will be able to enjoy a drive-through "Polar Express"-themed holiday party on Sunday, Dec. 6.

With up to 1,000 child and adult participants anticipated, this year's event is expected to be just as festive as in prior years, albeit with a pandemic twist. Both departments worked hard to make necessary adjustments to keep everyone safe, while also making sure that the children and families are still able to find joy this holiday season.

Participants at the socially-distant event will be greeted by a "conductor," who will lead cars through a winter wonderland set up at the Star Center, the LASD training academy in Whittier. As in previous years, holiday decorations will be amplified with real snow, courtesy of LASD. Cars will stop at predetermined locations along the mapped route, where age-appropriate toys and gifts will be loaded into the trunk for all children and youth in attendance.

While food will not be served this year, long-time partner McDonald's will still be on hand with gift cards for families. The Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising also donated bags of clothing and accessories that will be provided to children and youth. Lastly, several youth who have graduated high school, and are pursuing higher education, will be presented with scholarships.

To further ensure the health and safety of participants, the car route will be manned by masked volunteers from start to finish, with hand sanitizing stations available throughout. Unfortunately, while in the past children have enjoyed fun rides, a petting zoo and a visit with Santa, some aspects simply were not possible to incorporate this year because of health restrictions.



Children playing in the snow at last year's 999 for Kids holiday celebration.

"I'm just delighted it's happening at all," Cynthia said. "For a second we really thought we weren't going to have the holiday party, but LASD was determined to make this happen one way or another. It's the most highly anticipated event, and it would have been such a disappointment for the children and families if it didn't happen this year."

Thinking about the collaboration required to make this program successful, Cynthia is proud of the partnership the two departments have established over the years, noting that coordination is smooth

and well-functioning. In fact, no funding request has been denied in the time that she has been in the liaison role, a testament to her efforts, the strong connection between the departments and the passion that all involved have to ensure that the needs of medically fragile children are met.

"Being a social worker is very different from being in the world of the Sheriff's Department," Cynthia acknowledged. "It can be challenging to blend the two, but we've built good relationships and things are really working smoothly. I'm very grateful for this partnership, as they are one of the only groups that seems to recognize this need. They do because they've seen it as well."

Cynthia laments the fact that sometimes children linger in medical facilities without any connection to a loving adult. While the work can be difficult, and sometimes heartbreaking, she and the rest of the MCMS team want to help however they can.

"We're a small program, and not everyone knows we're here, but I wish more people did" Cynthia said. "When you're supervising these kids sometimes you are the only one they see regularly. That can really weigh on you, but the people who stay with MCMS do so because they care deeply about the well-being of these kids."

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