



From left to right: Deaf Services Unit Supervisor Karen Bowman, Sign Language Specialist (SLS) Pete Chavez, Kelly Schreiner and SLS Jesus Gomez at a 2019 event.

In all of her years of working with children and families from all walks of life, Kelly Schreiner never realized how disenfranchised and misunderstood those living with a disability were until she began working with the Deaf Services Unit (DSU) at the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

In a large and bureaucratic system designed for hearing individuals, those who do not meet that criteria face greater challenges. In the past, social workers without specialized training were often unable to effectively communicate with clients, leading to instances of frustration, confusion or misunderstanding. In 1994, the DSU was established to centralize the department's efforts to address the needs of children and families who are deaf or hard of hearing.

"When I first came to DSU two years ago, I saw a whole group of people who the system doesn't really focus on," said Kelly, an assistant regional administrator and 28-year DCFS veteran who oversees the DSU. "It really broadened my perspective. The community is small, but the cases are more complex."

The establishment of the unit allowed social workers to better support hearing impaired children and families by using an approach tailored to the unique challenges and needs of this community. DCFS provides the full range of child welfare services in American Sign Language (ASL) and encourages families to adapt to the needs of the child, rather than attempting to mold a child to fit the family. For example, instead of pushing a child to use hearing aids, staff recommend that parents or caregivers take steps to learn ASL to improve communication.

The unit now houses two cohorts of social workers, many of whom are deaf or hard of hearing themselves, and employs a team of ASL interpreters. Those who receive DSU services include both deaf and hard of hearing children, parents and caregivers.

Although the unit's interpreters previously only assisted social workers, Kelly made the decision to begin sending interpreters out to providers with clients to get them started with services more quickly. In addition, she adjusted roles and responsibilities to create one social work position to specialize in assisting those families where it is determined that a child could remain safely in the home while services are provided. Without the time constraints of court proceedings, this social worker can spend more time working closely with families.

The ongoing health crisis and restrictions on social interaction has added challenges for deaf and hard of hearing children and families, many of whom were already experiencing isolation. The impact on education for children and youth under DSU supervision is especially concerning because most

remote learning approaches are not deaf-friendly. Schools do not typically provide interpreters for deaf parents or youth, meaning that some parents cannot adequately monitor and support the learning process and children risk falling farther behind their peers.

Knowing that there is only so much that the DSU can do, Kelly hopes to pursue solutions that can help the deaf population through the department's efforts to advance workforce excellence and cross-sector partnerships.

Over the years, DCFS has led the way when it comes to incorporating ASL interpretation into practice. Other county departments have reached out to the DSU for guidance on assisting their own clients who are deaf or hard of hearing. The unit also has been instrumental in helping to certify county employees as bilingual in ASL.

Kelly, who spent time in foster care as a child, said she understands first-hand the impact that social services can have on the lives of vulnerable children and families and – little by little – she has seen improvement in outcomes for this community. Kelly attributes this success to her staff.

"The bottom line is that this population doesn't have equal access to services, and they desperately need it," Kelly said. "Our staff do a phenomenal job with what they have, and I can see the positive impact on families. Watching how passionate these workers are and how they go out of their way to help families despite dealing with issues most people never consider has opened my eyes in a way that I never knew possible."

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KELLY SCHREINER  
ASSISTANT REGIONAL ADMINISTRATOR



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