



DCFS AT WORK

Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

January 19, 2021
Volume 2, Edition 2



Emilio Mendoza



Adela Estrada

In the course of his work, Assistant Regional Administrator Emilio Mendoza has known of children as young as 7 years old who – at the hands of predatory and unscrupulous traffickers – work in the sex trade. For those children who have the good fortune of escaping that environment, the journey to wellness is paved with a range of complexities that call for intensive, specialized support.

The Commercially Sexually Exploited Children’s (CSEC) Unit is a team of 18 social workers and supervisors dedicated to helping these child victims navigate life’s challenges, seek resources and identify support that keeps them from being lured or coerced back into this illicit industry. Emilio manages operations for the team while his counterpart Administrator Adela Estrada oversees the group’s administrative functions.

In 2020, the Child Protection Hotline received approximately 900 calls to report possible cases, a figure that is expected to increase as visibility around the issue continues to grow. The average age of these youth is 15.

“The issue of exploitation has not wavered, even as the pandemic has created added challenges,” Emilio, who oversees CSEC Unit operations, said. “Many of these youth have been victimized both at home and on the street. This has a multi-faceted impact on youth, and it often requires substantial intervention to stabilize them and help them become functioning members of society.”

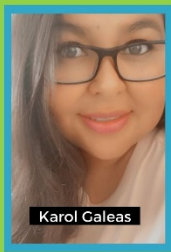
Many of the young people who interface with CSEC Unit social workers are runaways or have been reported as missing, according to Emilio. Some exhibit extreme behaviors, tending to become aggressive and volatile, and also commonly run away from placements, creating added difficulties for staff, who must respond to calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

To prepare CSEC Unit staff for the challenges of the assignment, social workers receive extended trauma-informed training with recent programs focusing on health issues and communication techniques. The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) now has three units within the CSEC Program exclusively dedicated to such cases.

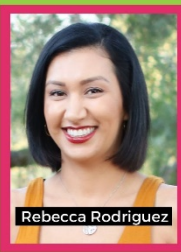
Recognizing the profound and lasting trauma experienced by these child victims, CSEC teams engage in a multi-disciplinary approach to promote recovery by providing services to address their medical, social, psychological and spiritual needs. Staff also regularly participate in work groups outside of DCFS to maintain open lines of communication with other providers and implement best practices as appropriate.



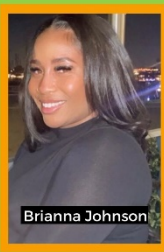
Pre-pandemic photo of CSEC Unit supervised by Dianna Greene (left to right): Dianna Greene, Jewel Copeland, Daney Moore, Liahna Johnson, Nirali Brahmhatt, and Kristy Quijano.



Karol Caleas



Rebecca Rodriguez



Brianna Johnson

CSEC Unit Supervised by Rebecca Rodriguez



Deonae Shackelford



Kimberly Spadaro



Virginia Lopez



Mayra Gallo

The CSEC team also works closely with first responders, providing training for law enforcement and others to help them identify signature characteristics of child sex trafficking victims. CSEC social workers additionally work with sex crimes prosecutors in the pursuit of justice as criminal cases against traffickers make their way through the courts.

Emilio, who has been involved with the unit since its inception, said part of his charge is to champion public education efforts about the insidious nature of child sex trafficking and its hidden-in-plain-sight existence. Many people interact with victims without realizing it, according to Emilio. For this reason, it's important for members of the public learn to identify some of the indicators including unusual tattoos or branding marks, provocative clothing and expensive belongings. Victims may also experience periods of homelessness, engage in drug use and have visible signs of physical abuse.

Every year in January, the CSEC Unit observes Human Trafficking Awareness Month by coordinating trainings and workshops for community partners, parents and youth to enhance the public's understanding about the prevalence and impact of trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation.

As Emilio tells it, thriving in the CSEC Unit takes a certain "it factor." The work is immersive and intense and demands inexhaustible grit. Emilio, therefore, could not be more proud of the resolve shown day in and out by CSEC staff.

"This work is not for everybody," he said. "With so many issues and limited resources, it is cumbersome to get victims adequate support. Although it can be tiring, our staff always stay motivated and they persevere because they believe in doing right by these kids."



CSEC Unit supervised by Caprisha Smyles-Garrett (left to right): Caprisha Smyles-Garrett, Benjamin Beltran Jasmine Greer, Sheila Hua Ng, Lashanda Ransom, KaTrina Arther, Lenora Burris, and Monique Martinez.

Report Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect to 800-540-4000