



Carlotta Koger's work aims to defy stereotypes. A champion for the Department of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) Father Strong Initiative, Carlotta seeks to engage fathers and upturn the misconception that some dads prefer to remain uninvolved.

The Father Strong Initiative – implemented by the Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity Section within the Office of Equity – strives to establish connections between children and youth and the paternal family. Carlotta, a supervising children's social worker in the Vermont Corridor office, is one of many Father Strong champions countywide.

"My purpose is to try my best to ensure that we have positive outcomes for African American families, and fathers, specifically those who often feel ignored by the system," she said.

But the work has its challenges. Some fathers distrust government intervention and express hesitancy because they incorrectly assume that social workers will enforce child support orders. These beliefs can cause children and youth to miss out on relationships not only with the father but also with extended relatives.

Father Strong champions also help dads overcome other types of barriers. In one instance, Carlotta and her team helped a military veteran reunify with his young son who entered foster care following an incident involving physical discipline.

Working closely with DCFS, the father attended therapy sessions and anger management classes, continuing with both beyond the requirements established by the Juvenile Dependency Court. Pleased with his progress, Carlotta's team sought to move forward with monitored visitation between the father and son.

To enhance engagement, Carlotta also assisted in the development of a Paternal Relative Inclusion Form for use throughout the life of DCFS cases to ensure that fathers and other paternal relatives have a voice and an opportunity to participate in a child's life. The form includes information such as the contact information for father's and paternal relatives. The form is currently in use at the Vermont Corridor and Palmdale offices and Carlotta hopes to eventually see this tool used countywide.

During Black History Month, we honor the work – past and present – that DCFS has done to strengthen and support African American children and families.

Despite the demands of her role, Carlotta firmly maintains that the benefits of working to overcome paternal apprehensions and complex family dynamics produce the best outcomes for children and youth. As the mother of three boys, Carlotta understands well that children thrive when they have support from loving parents and extended family.

"It's important to remember that fathers matter," Carlotta said. "We should never provide services to a family without making all efforts to engage fathers and paternal family. As I tell my staff, we have to dig deep, then dig deeper, and continue digging to exhaust all efforts to locate fathers and other relatives from the paternal side and to work on their behalf."

I am always coaching my team to not only remember why we got into this work, but also to step into the shoes of every family we serve.

CARLOTTA KOGER
SUPERVISING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKER

Working primarily with African American families, Carlotta has witnessed the negative impacts and pervasive effect of systemic and implicit bias around both race and gender. For example, implicit biases often shape the language used in court reports. As such, Carlotta advises her staff to interact with families rather than relying on written accounts. Carlotta is encouraged, however, by departmental efforts to address racial disproportionality and disparity.

A second generation social worker who followed in her mother's and godmother's footsteps, Carlotta cannot imagine doing anything else. "I am always coaching my team to not only remember why we got into this work, but also to step into the shoes of every family we serve," she said.

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