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Earlier this year, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) issued an urgent request for volunteers to help with a growing humanitarian crisis. The response was immediate and resounding, and the message was loud and clear: the DCFS team stands ready and proud to be of service whenever and wherever the need arises.



At the time, Los Angeles County was gearing up for the unprecedented task of assisting federal partners with an influx of unaccompanied children crossing the nation's southern border in search of safety, security and a better life. The desire to support the well-being of these children and youth was palpable across all of the 82 DCFS staff who ultimately stepped up to be a part of what became known as "Project Hope."

"We are so fortunate to have staff like [these] who want to ensure the safety and well-being of children and youth who have already experienced so much trauma in their young lives," said DCFS Director Bobby D. Cagle.

Because of their undeniable passion, he was confident from the outset that the team members' "empathy, smiles and kind words [would] help ease the fear and stress of this difficult situation for as many children and youth as possible."



Supervising Children's Social Worker
Eva Camacho

For Eva Camacho, answering the call was an easy decision and one she would make again without hesitation. "This was the opportunity of a lifetime, a way to serve a greater purpose," said Eva, a supervising children's social worker with the Pasadena office who immigrated from Guatemala at age seven. "We had no idea what to expect or exactly what we would be doing, but we were up for anything because this was so close to our hearts."

Fellow team member Monica Barron echoed these sentiments, harkening back to her own journey from Mexico as a young child and highlighting the connection she felt to these children and youth.

"When I saw the initial email asking for volunteers, it was like a flashback to me," said Monica, an adoptions assistant with the Compton-Carson office. "I was once like them, and I understand the stress they were going through. I simply saw the need and knew that this was one small way I could give back and help someone else."

While the federal government was ramping up its own efforts, DCFS was called upon to assist at the Pomona Fairplex emergency intake site by performing short-term case management functions such as assessments

and service planning for the children and youth arriving at the site. With significant child engagement and family-finding expertise, the Department's goal was to help establish a system to locate parents or extended family members to care for these children.

From May 1 to June 26, the Project Hope team joined together to volunteer their time and energy to this effort, rotating in on a weekly basis and in shifts to ensure coverage at all times, day and night. Team members came from across the 20 regional offices and specialized programs, representing a wide variety of staff levels and functions, including adoptions assistants, community health services workers, human services aides, children's social workers, supervisors, child services administrators, assistant regional administrators and deputy directors.

"I believe this work brought out the best in all of us, and it was truly a collaborative effort," Eva said. "On our shift, our motto became '#WhateverItTakes' because we were so invested in getting these children reunified with family. It was exhausting and emotional, but we all stayed late and kept coming back each day because it was that important."

Over the course of Project Hope, the population housed at the Pomona facility increased from 300 to 1,400, with DCFS staff assisting in the successful reunification of more than 800 children and youth.

"It was such an amazing thing to watch families being reunited with these kids, and there was never a dry eye when that happened," Monica said. "Seeing that always gave me the motivation to continue."

In one memorable case, Eva and other members of the Project Hope team pulled out all the stops to assess and evaluate a non-verbal six-year-old girl who was developmentally delayed due to a medical condition. Thanks to the team's tenacious sleuthing and an impressive amount of persistence, they were able to connect with the girl's mother and ultimately bring the family together after more than four years apart.



Eva will never forget the moment when mother and daughter finally connected for the first time on a video call. "At first she got a little shy, but then when her mother started talking and said, 'It's your mama!' she just grabbed the phone and started kissing it," Eva recalled.

Looking back on her time with Project Hope, Monica feels a sense of pride when thinking about the DCFS team members she worked with and what they accomplished.

"The commitment that each person had gave me strength," she said. "Every single person who worked on this put a little piece of their heart into this project, and all we wanted to do was make a difference. I like to think that we helped these kids start a new life, just like I did when I came to the United States, and that's what really matters."

"Many of us could show these children a level of understanding and warmth that only someone who has been through this journey can appreciate," Eva agreed. "We were able to tell them, 'I know it's really hard, but I get it and I've got you,' because we've actually been there."



Watch this video to learn more about the Project Hope team.

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