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Yvonne Vasconez is a children's social worker who has worked in the medical hubs since 2008.

Most people might not expect a social worker to operate out of a medical clinic, but Yvonne Vasconez has done so for more than a decade. Although her job may be somewhat unconventional, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) staff member knows her work contributes to the health and well-being of the children and youth in foster care who come through the door.

"When I got into social work, I wasn't sure how long I would stay, but now I'm going on 20 years," said Yvonne, who is stationed at the Los Angeles County + University of Southern California (LAC+USC) Medical Center.

Yvonne worked in the field for six years before joining the team of social workers assigned to the county's

medical hub clinics in 2008. Spearheaded by Dr. Astrid Heppenstall Heger of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services in the early 1990s, the "medical hub" concept was intended to bring together trained social workers and medical providers in one place to evaluate and care for children in the foster care system.

The medical hub clinic system reflects ongoing coordination of care for children and youth between DCFS and the Los Angeles County Departments of Health Services and Mental Health.

There are currently seven medical hubs across the county assisting in the medical care for children and youth under DCFS supervision, with each hub available to serve a subset of the DCFS regional offices. According to Yvonne, the LAC-USC clinic receives the most referrals and is the only location open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Along with three supervisors, Yvonne and the 15 other social workers stationed within the clinics conduct forensic interviews and intake screenings for the children and youth entering foster care. Assessments are prioritized for children with visible cuts or bruises and those suspected of being sexually exploited for commercial purposes.

Social workers who are out-stationed at the medical hubs perform thorough evaluations of each case referred to the clinics, coordinating extensively with both the primary social workers and medical providers. Depending on a child's condition and other factors such as documented concerns and medical history, the social workers and medical providers together determine the most appropriate approach for a child's care to ensure their physical and mental well-being.

Yvonne and her colleagues are trained to identify pertinent medical information, flag concerns for doctors and secure critical paperwork and records. Care for all children and youth is provided by medical practitioners who have received specialized training in trauma-informed care, including child abuse and neglect.

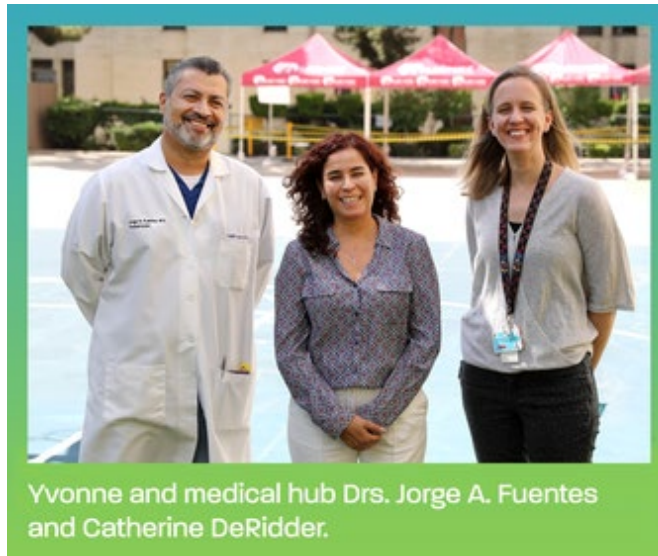
Yvonne expressed a deep appreciation for the tireless efforts of the medical providers, noting that the cross-departmental approach used by the hubs is a perfect example of how collaboration can improve DCFS's ability to attend to the needs of children and youth.

"The commitment of the practitioners and the impact they have on our overall DCFS mission is amazing," she said. "Sometimes people forget that medical providers have continued to work at the same pace throughout the pandemic, and the number of patients they see has remained steady. Their contribution to DCFS is invaluable."

Although the social workers stationed at the clinics are not case-carrying themselves and have limited interaction with children and families, Yvonne nonetheless sees her role as a vital piece of a system designed to ensure the safety and well-being of children and youth.

Knowing that her contribution helps vulnerable children and youth access the care they need keeps her motivated and eager to do all she can.

"Even though I'm no longer a case-carrying social worker, I still feel connected to the field because the work we do really is important for the overall safety of children and youth," she said.



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