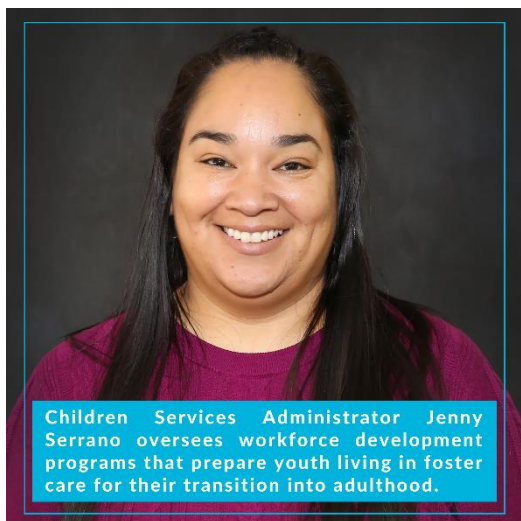




December 14, 2021 - Volume 2, Edition 24



Children Services Administrator Jenny Serrano oversees workforce development programs that prepare youth living in foster care for their transition into adulthood.

Exiting foster care in the 1990s after spending six years in the child welfare system left an indelible mark on Jenny Serrano. Ill-prepared for the responsibilities that came with living on her own, she struggled.

“After I left care, I was homeless, lived in a shelter and remained precariously housed until I finished graduate school,” Jenny said. “When I exited care, there weren’t a lot of opportunities available or even a broad awareness of what youth needed.”

Since that time, however, assistance for youth exiting care has evolved significantly, in large part due to input from Jenny and others with lived experience.

Now a children services administrator with the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Jenny works tirelessly to support older youth and prepare them for the transition into adulthood.

Jenny and her dedicated team of nine staff members in the Youth Development Services (YDS) Division manage a number of workforce initiatives through partnerships with other agencies that aim to help current and former foster youth gain job experience through subsidized employment and internships.

For example, Jenny recalls a young mother who completed 400 hours of work experience as a recreation leader at a local city park through the Bridge to Work program. She was later hired full time by the program, allowing her to get her own apartment and purchase her first car.

“Many of our youth are entirely responsible for their own financial well-being as soon as they exit care,” Jenny said. “Employment preparation and career exposure are essential to ensuring the success of young adults.”

Although research shows that work experience prior to age 18 dramatically improves later employment outcomes, nearly 90 percent of foster youth in California do not have a job at age 17, according to the National Youth in Transition Database. Data further reveals that more than 40 percent of these young people are still unemployed when they turn 21.

To address this issue, YDS employment programs provide youth with pre-work training in various soft skills, such as communication, attitude, teamwork and critical thinking, followed by paid work experience supervised by a case manager and an employer. DCFS also offers paid internships within the department, as well as project-based internships for academic credit.

Earlier this year, Jenny and her team received an award from the Los Angeles County Quality and Productivity Commission for developing and implementing an automated referral system that links DCFS to a network of more than 40 job centers. Thanks to the team’s ingenuity, the likelihood of future employment for current and former foster youth has greatly increased.

Reflecting on her own experience, Jenny is motivated by the memory of one committed DCFS coordinator who supported her as she struggled to find her footing.

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Jenny Serrano

“He always took my calls from payphones at odd hours and always had a pocket full of quarters to give me for my laundry,” she said. “I think of him and show up every day the way I wish more people would have showed up for me.”

**The DCFS at Work newsletter will be taking a break until January 2022.  
Happy Holidays!**

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