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Looking back at 31 years of public service, Ruena Borja sees her career trajectory as coming full circle.

"Sometimes I find myself reflecting and realize that I am merging and engaging my interests in political science and law, but still staying true to my social work calling," said Ruena, a children services administrator who leads the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Governmental and Legislative Relations (GLR) section.

Working as a front-line social worker in the field gave her an understanding of the vulnerabilities and needs of children and families, which proved useful when she subsequently worked to implement enacted laws with the policy section. These experiences were perfect precursors to GLR, where she anticipates potential hurdles and evaluates the design of legislation on the front end.

The three members of the GLR team monitor and review legislation, parsing out which items could have an impact on the child welfare arena. They conduct in-depth analysis and provide recommendations to departmental leadership and the Chief Executive Office regarding whether the county should take a position on specific bills at the state or federal level.

In 2021 alone, approximately 2,400 bills were introduced, 109 of which were closely related to child welfare. Forty-seven bills impacting DCFS and the children, youth and families served were ultimately enacted, according to Ruena.

In addition to continuously monitoring proposed legislation that evolves as it moves through the process, the GLR team spends a significant amount of time advocating for policy positions and approaches that will benefit children and families. For example, GLR helped bring statewide and national attention to an unintended consequence of a change in the law that put children and youth in congregate care at risk of losing health insurance coverage.

"This is an exciting time because our team is really at the forefront of child welfare advocacy," Ruena said. "As a large county, we have a significant need because we are often more impacted by changes than other jurisdictions. But this also gives us the opportunity to have a greater voice in the process."

Administrative Services Division Manager Ayanna McLeod, who oversees GLR, highlighted the important role advocacy plays in ensuring DCFS' ability to support children, families and the community.

"As the realm of child welfare evolves, the GLR team plays an integral role in the advocacy of state and federal legislative policies and strategies that ultimately maintain and enhance critical child welfare services," Ayanna said. "GLR is instrumental to the department's mission and values, as it ensures our programs, budget and policy priorities remain at the forefront of county, state and federal agendas."

Recent efforts include advocating for greater funding for emergency caregivers and resource families, as well as helping to shape the state's implementation plan for the federal Family First Prevention Services Act.

In addition, the team developed a \$200 million budget proposal to mitigate the department's projected structural deficit, which county leadership agreed to sponsor at the state level for the upcoming fiscal year.

The fast-paced legislative environment keeps this small team of three on their toes. Staff take a proactive approach and cultivate strong partnerships with counterparts in other county departments and jurisdictions to stay abreast of changing circumstances and schedules.

"The nature of advocacy work means that we have to be flexible because we deal with constantly shifting priorities, busy schedules and tight timelines," Ruena said.

Nonetheless, she appreciates that DCFS can be involved early on because it means that the department can provide feedback and ensure that its needs are considered from the start.

"At the end of the day, it's rewarding to know that we had a hand in creating an outcome that will benefit the department and the children and families we serve," Ruena said. "Ultimately, that's what we all came here for, and that's what keeps our team motivated to continue doing this work."



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