



Having worked with many incarcerated parents during her 13 years as a social worker and supervisor with the Department of Children and Family Services, Cristina Herrera understands all too well the limitations experienced by these families.

“When parents with an open DCFS case are incarcerated, the odds are stacked against them because now they have to deal with another system that they do not know how to maneuver,” said Herrera. Today, as a Children Services Administrator, she monitors the Incarcerated Parents Program (IPP).

The program was created in 2010 as a pilot between DCFS’ South County Office and the Century Regional Detention Facility (CRDF) in Lynwood, a women’s jail. IPP, which is now available to all offices, is a partnership between DCFS, the community-based organization Friends Outside Los Angeles (FOLA) and the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department (LASD).

FOLA Case Manager Celina Ruiz works closely with social workers to help mothers make progress on their family reunification case plans. Ruiz facilitates and monitors in-person visits so mothers may stay bonded with their children and ensures that they are up to date with their cases and informed about the availability of classes in their case plans.

In partnership with social workers, she also facilitates the delivery of letters between the children and mothers, delivers photos and hand-drawn pictures to the women and encourages them to participate in classes.

IPP visits at CRDF are held in person and are non-contact. They take place in the attorney room with the mother on one side of a glass partition and the child(ren) and Ruiz on the other. Communication occurs through a speaker. Prior to the visit, Ruiz meets with the child and caregiver to discuss how the visit will work and to address any questions or concerns; she also debriefs them after the visit. Ruiz then provides the social worker with a recap.



Social Worker Stephanie Gonzalez, who currently has a family enrolled in the program, said having a dedicated case manager for these families mitigates complications for those involved.

“I think it’s such a great program — I wish we had it at other jails,” Gonzalez said. “The caregiver is so happy that now she doesn’t have to navigate the online inmate visitation scheduling system to make an appointment for an in-person visit. Celina takes care of everything.”

One case that Ruiz thinks about often is that of a mother who was at CRDF for more than two years while she awaited trial in her criminal case. Throughout the entire time, the mother had weekly IPP visits with her baby and took every class she could. Ultimately, a jury found the mother not guilty. Upon her release, she went back

to school and got a job. At the time of her release, her reunification services had been terminated, but she petitioned the court and was reunited with her child.

The joint effort between Ruiz and social workers keeps mothers motivated and hopeful. Ruiz, who is approaching her 10-year work anniversary, said she is as committed as ever to her work.

“I sometimes go home thinking I didn’t make a huge difference. But then I remember the smiles on the mothers or the children during their visits,” she said. “I know that I made someone’s day a little brighter, and that keeps my heart full.”

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