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Division Chiefs Roxanna Flores-Aguilar (L) and Cynthia Wong-Blye (R) work hand-in-hand to build DCFS's capacity as a learning organization. Both represent DCFS in the National Partnership for Child Safety, a quality improvement collaborative.

Child welfare professionals work exhaustively to prevent neglect, maltreatment and deaths. When tragedies occur, however, families, community members and social workers collectively mourn and demand answers.

Roxanna Flores-Aguilar knows this first hand. One can hear the emotion in her voice when she recounts what it was like to lead an office in the aftermath of a child death.

A former regional administrator in the Department of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) Lancaster Office, Roxanna recalls the crushing grief felt by the community. She also remembers working tirelessly to advocate for additional resources and to support affected staff.

"My experience was powerful and memorable," Roxanna said. "Tragedy in this line of work is not something any of us take lightly, but I was motivated by the perseverance and resilience of our staff, despite a plethora of challenges outside of their control."

### Creating a Culture of Safety

Influenced by her experience, Roxanna's highest priority became elevating the voices of social workers, supervisors and managers on the front line and identifying and implementing best practices to mitigate the risk of harm to children. Today, she manages the Continuous Quality Improvement Division.

Intent on examining its practices and learning from the experiences of other child welfare jurisdictions, the department joined the National Partnership for Child Safety (NPCS) in 2019. The partnership is a quality improvement collaborative intended to enhance child safety and reduce instances of neglect and abuse.

Thirty-one child welfare jurisdictions from across the country comprise the NPCS. The group offers organizations a space to share data and best practices and to collaborate on strategies to mitigate common challenges. In particular, it seeks to integrate the concept of safety science into the child welfare space.

Safety science is the practice of bringing together data, technology, research and shared experiences to improve safety within a given environment. Other high stakes industries including health care and aviation have been known to implement the practice with significant results.

In the context of child welfare, safety science recognizes the complex nature of child welfare work, and seeks to create a supportive environment where staff may share, ask questions and learn from mistakes. In addition, it emphasizes system accountability.

"The NPCS aligns with our department's core values and strategic direction," Roxanna said. "It has allowed us to share our successes, challenges and lessons learned, and to hear from other jurisdictions. What we're learning is that our system is not that different from others and that we all face similar difficulties."

## Learning from Tragic Outcomes

Risk Management Division Chief Cynthia Wong-Blye also serves as a DCFS representative with the NPCCS and shares a desire to cultivate a learning environment that promotes positive change and growth through open discussion and transparency. She and Roxanna draw on their combined expertise to discern how outcomes from case reviews can inform systemic change within Los Angeles County.

“In punitive agencies, staff often make decisions out of fear,” Cynthia said. “However, when we create safe spaces for our staff to talk through and learn from tragic outcomes, we are building confidence in decision-making and helping staff develop insight into their own practice and where they can improve.”

Roxanna and Cynthia note that recognizing successful practice is ultimately just as important as identifying opportunities for improvement. Indeed, an environment that supports communication, collaboration and shared responsibility, rather than focusing on punitive measures allows the department to funnel energy and resources into successful practices while still providing space to learn.

Roxanna and Cynthia credit NPCCS and DCFS staff and leadership with shifting the department away from a culture of blame to one of collaboration and learning. They see participation in the NPCCS as a prime example of the department’s commitment to advancing safety science at DCFS.

Cynthia, who has been with the department for 26 years, has witnessed an important shift in how the department responds to the most serious incidents involving children under DCFS supervision.

“We’re no longer immediately reactive,” she said. “We don’t make assumptions or jump to conclusions. Instead, we try to understand the story behind the scenes and give staff a voice in the review process. Being a learning organization is a continuum, and we continue to look for opportunities to improve all areas of practice.”

Echoing the sentiment, Roxanna added, “Safety science hones in on the message that social workers cannot be left to stand alone in the complex and enormous task of protecting children. It is our collective responsibility to create the type of environment staff need to succeed and, if they thrive, the children and families we serve will too.”

***For the Record: A previously published version said the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services joined the National Partnership for Child Safety in 2021. The department joined the partnership in 2019.***

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## WHAT IS SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE?

While most parents want what is best for their families, they cannot always do it alone.

Child welfare social workers specialize in building upon the strengths of families and communities to cultivate safe and loving environments for children.

Social work practice refers to child welfare workers embracing social work values and using them to gain an understanding of families’ needs in order to provide appropriate services.

While in some instances social workers must intervene to protect children from harm, their highest purpose is to keep families safely together.

DCFS relies on other county departments, community and faith-based organizations, advocates and engaged community members to create a robust child safety net.

Good social work practice and community support collectively enhance child safety and produce the best outcomes for families, according to experts.

