



March 16, 2023 - Volume 4, Edition 3



DCFS social worker Maria Fuentes works collaboratively at Stuart House with professionals from other agencies to help children who have experienced sexual abuse move toward healing and justice.

The exterior of Stuart House is warm and inviting, offering those who come through its doors a sense of comfort and security. This calming environment is exactly the goal of the facility, designed to put its visitors at ease at a time in their lives marred by unspeakable trauma and turmoil.

Established in 1988 as a program of the Rape Treatment Center, Stuart House moved into its current standalone location in 2016. The move expanded the program's ability to serve child victims of sexual abuse with cases under investigation by law enforcement. "Stuart House is meant to help children and youth feel like they're not going to yet another office or institutional

setting like a police station or hospital, which can be cold and impersonal," said Maria Fuentes, one of two Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) social workers at the facility, which isn't pictured due to the sensitive nature of the work.

"Everything in one place means the process is easier and more comfortable, and young people are able to receive faster services to address the trauma of sexual abuse," she added.

DCFS joins trauma-informed detectives, prosecutors, advocates and forensic interview specialists co-located at Stuart House. The purpose is to expedite investigations and provide treatment services for children and families. The child-friendly setting and multi-disciplinary approach mean that children experience fewer interviews so as to prevent re-traumatization, and in an environment that minimizes stress.

Having been exposed to difficult circumstances in her own childhood, Maria is passionate about helping families navigate the system and overcome crises. After seeing the difference that the approach had with some of her cases, the eight-year DCFS veteran was thrilled to take on the role of Stuart House DCFS liaison in March 2022.

Maria coordinates with the child's primary social worker and other organizations at Stuart House to research case histories and guide families through the investigative process from beginning to end. Children come in for the forensic interview, receive mental health services and attend "court school," an experience that introduces young people to the criminal court process and prepares them for potential proceedings.



“The children and their families are surrounded by experts, and the difference it makes for them is notable,” Maria said. “These cases can be intensely emotional, but it’s so rewarding when I see a child get the justice they deserve or the services they need to help them move forward with their life.”

Report Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect to 800-540-4000

Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services | www.dcfslacounty.gov | Follow us on [Facebook](#) & [Twitter](#)