



June 15, 2023 - Volume 4, Edition 6



Gail Winston's childhood experiences motivate her to help young people exiting foster care find affordable and stable housing.

Growing up in Mississippi more than 50 years ago, Gail Winston remembers what it was like to endure financial hardship, racial inequity and lack of opportunities. The memories remain so fresh that they continue to influence her work at the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

Gail, who manages the Supportive Housing Division, works exclusively with young people aging out of the foster care system. Many of these youth have spent years in care, some have their own children, and many do not have family members or friends to support or guide them as they become adults.

One could speculate that Gail is so deeply connected to the work because she recognizes herself in the faces and experiences shared by the young people she serves. Gail remembers living with her mother and six brothers in a home so run down that they

could see through the plank walls. The home had rats and no bathroom — a shared experience, regrettably, for many Black families in the segregated South.

“We were truly one step from being out there in the cold,” said Gail, a 30-year DCFS veteran. “It was a horrible way to live, and when I started working in the child welfare housing field, I found that I could really relate to the challenges some of our families and young people are facing.”

The precarious situation her family and many others endured was a direct result of the structural racism faced by communities of color. A sixth-grade student when schools were integrated, Gail witnessed how systemic inequities around housing, educational attainment and access to supportive services perpetuated disadvantages that are tough to escape.

With a fifth-grade education and a job that paid \$12 a week, Gail’s mother relied on the goodwill and generosity of a local welfare department that “adopted” their family, and many other Black families, to ensure that children had something to look forward to each holiday season. At 28, Gail was the first of her siblings to attend college — graduating magna cum laude — thanks to the support of her spouse, a step that she credits for her ability to overcome the hardships that plagued her family as a child.

When DCFS created a specialized division in 2021 to unite all housing programs for families and youth in a single place, Gail jumped at the chance to help guide the Department’s vision and direction. The division is the first child welfare housing division in the United States. Gail said she is proud of how the 26-person staff has streamlined efforts and implemented key changes in the limited span of just two years.

Under her direction, the division established an enhanced process to identify all youth exiting the system within 90 days. This is when Supportive Housing Division staff collaborate with social workers to confirm that young people have a concrete and attainable housing plan in place. Division staff help locate alternative placements as needed and connect youth to organizations that can provide funds,



As a young girl in Mississippi, Gail Winston — shown here at age 14 — attended a segregated school until 6th grade. The systemic inequalities faced by Gail and her family nearly forced them into homelessness.

vouchers and other services to make sustainable housing possible. Steps like these lessen the risk that youth will be left without a safe place to live.

“This is the hardest work I have ever done because I can’t control the supply of housing or make housing more affordable,” Gail said. “We can’t create homes, but we do all we can to help these young people get on their feet so they can break the cycle of poverty that leads to experiencing homelessness.”

According to Gail, a lack of affordable housing in Los Angeles County is the most troublesome barrier for young people transitioning out of foster care.

“Ultimately, I have faith that these young adults can go on to be successful despite their trauma, and that, with a helping hand, they can move beyond their circumstances, just like I did,” she added.



Learn about a unique partnership in LA County that helps youth transitioning out of foster care to have a safe place to call home.

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](#)