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Jessica Langford and a team of multi-disciplinary experts prepare new child welfare workers for the challenges of fieldwork through simulations based on real-life scenarios.

The mother's appearance was disheveled. She kept her eyes down, fingers fidgeting nervously with a child's plush duck in her lap. Empty bottles littered the coffee table, and a wine stain on the wall hinted at an altercation.

She spoke cautiously as the person seated across the dimly lit living room probed into her life with gentle but targeted questions. Her voice trembled with emotion as she recounted the prior night's events, which landed her 4-month-old daughter in the hospital with a fractured arm.

Palpable relief flooded the room when the facilitator finally raised the lights and paused the simulation. The gallery of observers, trainees awaiting their turn, collectively exhaled a breath no one realized they were holding. The social worker trainee in the living room chair chuckled nervously

and fanned herself with a notebook as trainers and peers offered feedback on her mock interview with a trainer playing the part of a mother facing allegations of abuse.

Simulated scenarios are one of various techniques used by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) University Training Section to prepare newly hired social workers for what to expect in their chosen career path. First incorporated into the standard training protocol in 2013 and conducted in spaces designed to look like the inside of a residence, the simulations help to crystallize classroom concepts and serve as a bridge between theory and practice.

"The simulations really made me feel more comfortable starting out in the field," said Jessica Langford, who went through the simulation as a new hire in 2014. After working in the field for seven years, she embraced her passion for mentoring and joined the simulation training team in 2021.

"This is a chance for trainees to 'try on' the job and get constructive feedback and guidance," she said. "We want to show them that this is what social work looks like, and this is why it is so important to have compassion and keep an open mind when working with families."

Based on actual past cases, the realistic situations give child welfare trainees the chance to test their skills and receive immediate feedback from veteran workers in a safe environment. The multi-disciplinary team members — including personnel from DCFS, local universities, law enforcement and the Office of the County Counsel — serve as facilitators and role players, challenging participants to think creatively about their approach.



Social work trainees practice engagement skills and interview techniques during simulated interactions while fellow trainees and trainers observe.

For a decade, DCFS has used the simulations — conducted virtually during the pandemic until returning to in-person sessions in June — to train more than 4,000 new social workers. They encourage trainees to develop situational awareness, learn to adapt, maintain

realistic expectations, question assumptions and consider the possible impacts of their decisions.

Indeed, despite the controlled setting, many participants report that the experience is more tense and emotional than they anticipated. This is by design, as the simulations are one of the last steps before workers begin engaging with families in the field.

In addition to giving trainees a taste of what to expect, Jessica also believes that the real-world exercises would be eye-opening for those outside the social work field.

“I do wish key decision-makers could have the opportunity to go through or observe the simulations,” she said. “I think it would shine a light on all the moving parts, the intense challenges involved, how hard this work really is and how we, as trainers, do all we can to set our social workers up for success.”



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