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Social Worker Karmen Babajanians empowers new children's social workers through the DCFS Mentorship Program

In Karmen Babajanians' view, any day that she can empower new generations of social workers and help infuse the child welfare system with empathy is a good day.

"Our profession is one of helping hands and, in my opinion, that starts from within," said Karmen, who serves as a mentor to incoming social workers through the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Mentoring Program.

Despite having an advanced degree and experience serving the unhoused, Karmen recalls feeling unprepared for the realities of working with children and families when she joined the Department in 2016. Without a dedicated guide to help her navigate unfamiliar territory, she

developed her own system for managing cases.

Karmen also began to share her expertise with incoming social workers. Affectionately referred to by colleagues in the Van Nuys DCFS regional office as their "County Mother," Karmen embraced this role and officially joined the Department's Mentoring Program in 2019 after a few years of providing informal advice.

In the summer of 2023, Karmen connected with her fifth mentee when she was paired with Gabriella Albor through the program.

"Karmen helped ease the natural fear that comes from starting a new position," Gabriella said. "From the very first day, she made me feel like I could come to her whenever I had a question. If I didn't have her, this transition would have been incredibly difficult."

Mentoring programs offer numerous benefits to government agencies like DCFS, including improving job satisfaction and retention rates, facilitating knowledge transfer and encouraging career and leadership development. The DCFS Mentoring Program, which began in 2017, has helped approximately 2,200 new social workers reap the benefits of mentorship as they begin a career in public service.

Including Gabriella, Karmen has mentored five new social workers in five years. Her mentees receive a comprehensive reference packet of information and templates that she has curated over the years, as well as opportunities for hands-on training by shadowing her on calls.

Among the most important guiding principles Karmen imparts to mentees is the value of treating families with respect.

“These are human beings, families who have been through trauma,” Karmen said. “If you go in with an attitude or prejudice, you won’t be successful.”

Gabriella took this advice to heart after watching Karmen in action.

“She showed me that we should have empathy for the families we serve because it’s a scary time for them,” Gabriella said. “Watching the way she works with clients helped me understand that how you approach clients can make a huge difference.”



Channeling her mentor, Gabriella recently defused a tense moment with a distraught parent. She approached the mother and had a quiet conversation in Spanish, the parent’s primary language. Once the mother was calm, social workers were better able to explain the situation to her and arrive at a mutually agreeable solution, recounted Karmen, who witnessed the interaction.

Karmen continues to have a close relationship with Gabriella and her other mentees, watching as they build their own practices with a firm foundation of kindness and compassion.

Although still in her first year with the Department, Gabriella said that when the time is right, she will consider mentorship to pay forward the support that she received from Karmen.

It is a mentorship legacy that Karmen and DCFS can be proud of.

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