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Monica Ventura, a group supervisor with the unit, emphasizes that sometimes simply listening to youth is a powerful way to offer support.

Who said courthouses can't be fun? Shelter Care elicits youthful smiles and joy

For children awaiting dependency court hearings where difficult family issues take center stage, emotions can run high. Shelter Care offers young people a place to temporarily release their worries and enjoy positive distractions.

Monica Ventura, a group supervisor in the Shelter Care and Transportation Unit of DCFS' Juvenile Court Services, has interacted with children and

youth in this context for the past decade.

"We're trying to provide a safe space where they can just be kids," she said. "We get to know their personalities — learn how to talk to them and when to joke with them. We're not tied to their cases, so we don't know what's going on, but we can still offer support. And sometimes, we just listen."

From January to September of this year, 4,340 children and youth received Shelter Care services for in-person court hearings at one of four courthouses — Monterey Park, Antelope Valley, Pomona and Compton. Others attended virtual hearings, which have been so successful that in-person appearances have not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.

Youth arrive safely at their destinations thanks to 30 dedicated transportation workers who engage with their young passengers to foster authentic connections from the time they are picked up at their resource family homes or short-term residential therapeutic placements to the time they get to their designated courthouses. After that, the transportation workers support their young people throughout the day.

At Shelter Care, children and youth are welcomed by 19 enthusiastic group supervisors in a vibrant, creative environment. An upbeat movie generally plays in the background and youth are divided into two groups based on age (4 to 11 and 12 to 21). Meals are provided, and throughout their stay, youth can play games, create art or take advantage of various recreational activities in an outdoor playground. They also have access to a library of books they can take with them. Seasonal events, like "Summer Fun Days" and holiday celebrations, further enrich their experiences.



Courtney Kimbrough, a transportation worker in the Shelter Care and Transportation Unit, underscores the importance of authentically connecting with youth.

Celebrating milestones, such as birthdays and achievements, is another key element, with gift cards and encouragement to recognize their successes. Through a partnership with Comfort for Court Kids, each child receives a teddy bear for comfort. Youth may also select essential toiletries and clothing.

Courtney Kimbrough, a transportation worker who's been with the unit since 2013, said she feels a great sense of responsibility for the children and youth in her care. Listening and engaging with them can transform potentially stressful experiences into uplifting ones. From allowing youth to choose the music during transport to demonstrating empathy in challenging moments, her goal is to make them

comfortable.

"I love watching them in my rearview mirror and seeing the change in their tone and body language," Kimbrough said. "That's what you have to do, honor these kids and respect them."