



DCFS at Work Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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Equity Is Aspirational, but Is It Achievable? The DCFS Office of Equity Weighs In.



Arena Turner, division chief for the Office of Equity, aims to enhance access to culturally responsive services that better meet the unique needs of the county's children and families.

Arena Turner understands all too well that reasonable minds can differ and often do. Thirteen years of experience with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) affirm that collective agreement is rare, typically hinging on uniting people around compelling issues, causes and facts. In the best scenarios, communities mobilize to effect change.

Such is the case for DCFS, which established its Office of Equity (OOE) in 2019 to address unsettling national trends in child welfare systems across the country, including its own.

Arena, the division chief for the Office of Equity, leads a 12-person team charged with examining, aligning

and centralizing strategies, policies and practices that affect families from historically excluded communities. Five years after the OOE's inception, Arena shares updates and insights about the work.

Please explain why DCFS needs an office focused on equity.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors granted DCFS' request to establish the OOE after being presented with concerning facts about child welfare systems, including DCFS. Among them:

DCFS data revealed that, in some of its regional offices, African American and Black children are placed in foster care at a rate that is five times greater than children of other races. Furthermore, at every decision point — from finding stable foster homes to reunifying with parents to adoptions — African American and Black children in foster care fare worse.

LGBTQ+ youth in foster care are more likely to experience detrimental physical and mental health outcomes compared to their heterosexual peers, including higher rates of suicide, according to national data.

A gender equality analysis at DCFS identified gender-based disparities in services for children and youth in foster care, as well as in the workplace.

Equity encompasses more than race, sexual orientation and gender equality. How is the OOE championing efforts for other populations?

When the OOE was established, which predates my arrival in 2023, its foundational pillars sought to address systemic inequities related to race, sexual orientation and gender equality. However, equity efforts at DCFS are far more inclusive.

The department has several specialized offices and programs that support the unique needs of the county's diverse families. These include offices dedicated to serving deaf and hard-of-hearing children and parents; children and young people with special medical needs; and undocumented children and youth.



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Additionally, the OOE is invited into decision-making spaces where we can directly influence things like hiring, training, social work practice, policies, and contracting to achieve alignment with the county's Anti-Racism, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiative.

The concept of equity remains abstract for laypeople as it applies to social work. Can you provide tangible examples of how the OOE is integrating changes across DCFS' 20 regional offices and 9,000 plus workforce?

Over the last five years, DCFS has adopted best practices, updated policies and provided specialized training for staff so that there is a clear understanding of the inequity, disproportionality and disparity in our system and their potential causes. Our department has also engaged community stakeholders — including young people, parents with lived experience, and advocates — in discussions on these topics and continues to welcome input on where improvements are still needed.

Key initiatives resulting from this work include new assessments for children and parents, innovative pilot programs, and enhanced administrative and social work practices. For example, the Women and Girls program is tackling the unique difficulties encountered by women and girls within the child welfare system by working with internal and external partners to offer customized services and resources for young mothers and survivors of domestic violence.

DCFS data played a critical role in making a case for the establishment of the OOE. How is your office using data now to improve outcomes for children and families?

In keeping with our original areas of concentration, the OOE remains focused on safely reducing the number of African American and Black children and young people who enter foster care. Again, the department is intentionally investing in advancing equity for this racial group because our data continues to show their overrepresentation and poor long-term outcomes.

Among our most successful efforts are the Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity (ERDD) Program and the SAFE Reductions of Entries initiative.

Data has also been used to make improvements to the department's LGBTQ+ practices, policies and services. We now have LGBTQ+ Champions in every regional office and continue to work hand-in-hand with community organizations to provide affirming care and support to LGBTQ+ young people and families.

Where can community members learn more about DCFS's evolving equity work?

Our department recently published a microsite called "Advancing Equity: Our Way Forward" on dcfs.lacounty.gov that chronicles more than 40 years of culturally responsive, family-centered approaches in historically excluded communities.

The goal for this webpage is to serve as a window into our department where community members may learn more about DCFS' evolving efforts, track our progress and hold us accountable.



Last June, the Office of Equity spearheaded the department's participation in the LA Pride parade, where employees showed support for LGBTQ+ young people and families while raising awareness about the ongoing need for affirming foster parents.