



DCFS at Work Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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Program Seeks to Help Teen Parents Avert Future Child Welfare Involvement

At age 17, the young mother faced an uncertain future. Nothing came easy as she attempted to care for her energetic 2-year-old son, earn a high school diploma and navigate the child welfare system — all while living with a traumatic brain injury.

As Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Supervising Children's Social Worker Anita Melendez recalls, the young woman felt lost and didn't know where to turn. Her life was complicated, and she was overwhelmed. DCFS' Expectant and Parenting Youth (EPY) Conference helped her turn things around.

Through the EPY Conference, the young mother linked with Early Head Start, an early education program in her

community, where her little boy could receive child development services at no cost. The EPY team also connected her with the Alliance for Children's Rights Education Program, which helped her attain the academic support she needed to finish high school.

Each year, approximately 300 foster youth — primarily female and over 17 — participate in personalized EPY Conferences, which are specifically tailored to address their individual needs. Among those present are the social worker, a representative from the Children's Law Center of California and anyone the youth wishes to invite, in addition to social workers from advocacy organizations.

"At the conference, we tell them, 'We hope that you'll think of us as extra people on your team,'" said Anita, an EPY Conference facilitator for the past decade. "They're all very resilient. They try so hard, and they truly want to be the best parents they can be."

As in the case of the 17-year-old mother, support doesn't end upon graduation or when a youth reaches legal adulthood. The program serves young parents through age 21, connecting them with various resources and services, including child and health care, and financial and housing support. Thereafter, young adults who want additional support may opt to stay connected with their resource specialists until age 25.

Supervising Children's Social Worker Hipolito Mendez, an EPY Conference facilitator for 12 years, said building rapport and trust with youth is critical.



Supervising Children's Social Workers Hipolito Mendez and Anita Melendez have worked together for a decade as the department's two Expectant and Parenting Youth (EPY) Conference facilitators.



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“We reassure them that the conference is to help them, and receiving support and resources from us does not mean their child has an open case,” he said.

Hipolito is one of the two EPY Conference facilitators for DCFS who apply a youth-centered team approach to share information on important topics and actively listen so that young parents feel heard and supported. Ultimately, the goal is for these gatherings to increase parents' confidence and resilience so they have the support and skills necessary to raise their children safely without DCFS intervention.

Hipolito credits the program with a reduction in the number of current and former foster youth with open cases for their own children, suggesting a disruption in intergenerational cycles of child welfare involvement. The majority of new parents who participate in EPY Conferences never have open DCFS cases for their children and report having stable, sustainable living arrangements, he said.

“They don't want a case ever opened for their kids,” Hipolito added. “So, right there, the cycle stops.”

Youth who participate in the program may have follow-up EPY Conferences every few months or as needed to discuss their pregnancy and parenting needs, education plans, and other important areas such as child support, custody, probation compliance and housing options. Participants also learn about a onetime \$2,700 expectant parent benefit for the purchase of essential items such as a stroller, crib and diapers.

“We make it clear that no one is born knowing how to be a parent,” Hipolito said. “The best thing they can do is ask for help and not wait until they feel like they are drowning.”

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EPY Conference Facilitator**