



DCFS at Work Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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In July, Director Brandon T. Nichols marked his third year at the helm of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

Mind and heart aligned: Child safety and family well-being drive director's vision

Three years into his tenure as DCFS director, Brandon T. Nichols is leading one of the country's largest child welfare organizations with sure-footed, consistent steps that have compounded into observable results. Director Nichols recently shared his thoughts on DCFS' progress, highlighting efforts to fix systemic issues that disproportionately affect families of color; strengthen social work practice; and support families early on before serious problems become unmanageable.

What stands out from the last three years?

First, I'd like to say that I'm so proud of the incredible people in this organization. Their compassion, strength and commitment to children and families are at the center of everything we do. In addition to working closely with our staff, my interactions with caregivers, parents and youth deeply influence my perspective and inform every decision I make. These conversations fuel me.

Is there an initiative that is especially meaningful to you?

Father Strong Advocates is particularly close to my heart. Being a father is the most important thing to me. It is what defines me. I feel like it's my most important work and my greatest duty. Through this program, we actively seek fathers out and intentionally engage and support them. We're building strong collaborations with community partners that center fathers as vital contributors to their children's safety and well-being. As a result of these efforts, we are now increasingly successful in safely connecting fathers with their children.

What partnerships have made a significant difference in your work?

DCFS alone cannot safeguard children so strengthening and expanding our partnerships is important, particularly with respect to how we're addressing systemic inequities that more heavily impact families of color. One example is our Community Cultural Brokers program, through which members of the Black and African American community —



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including faith leaders — partner with us to support families navigating our system. Early results show this is strengthening trust and engagement.

We're also convening more of what we call Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity roundtables that bring together DCFS staff, community partners and external stakeholders at our regional offices. These gatherings help us better understand the challenges Black and African American families face and explore creative, meaningful methods to support families so that children and young people enter foster care only when they may not safely remain at home.

How has the foster care experience improved for young people during your time as director?

Listening to young people share where the system has fallen short keeps me motivated to do everything we can to improve the foster care experience, starting from the moment a young person enters care due to circumstances beyond their control.

Our continued focus is to have children who must enter foster care live with family members. More than 50% of children entering care are now consistently residing with relatives, and several of our regional offices are placing children with kin at a rate of 90% immediately upon entering foster care.

We've also closed the two county-operated shelters we opened when there was a shortage of available home-like settings. That change reflects real progress.

I am also proud of the fact that we have seen a dramatic reduction in reliance on congregate care. From a time when more than 5,000 children were living in group homes and other congregate settings, we're now down to 164.

How are you fortifying social work practice?

Ongoing training and professional development of staff is critical to creating a child welfare system that is responsive and focused on protecting children and helping families overcome deeply personal challenges. We've adopted motivational interviewing, an evidence-based practice, to help staff build more collaborative relationships with families. While it's still early, we're already hearing anecdotal feedback about its impact.

Additionally, DCFS continues to expand services focused on newborns, infants, toddlers and preschoolers through its



DCFS Director Brandon T. Nichols celebrates with young people at the annual Six Flags Magic Mountain holiday event hosted by Los Angeles County Supervisor Kathryn Barger.



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**- Brandon T. Nichols
DCFS Director**

Young Children in Care Birth to Five Program, which helps social workers better engage with parents and caregivers to assess and address the unique developmental needs of children up to age 5.

In 2023, a specialized courtroom opened at the Los Angeles County Superior Court, Compton Juvenile Division using a court model that offers children ages 0 to 3 and their parents an environment more conducive to strengthening family bonds.

Why is it important for DCFS to work with the community to improve conditions for families before their problems become unmanageable?

Raising children is one of life’s greatest challenges; no

parent should face a crisis alone. We collaborate with a strong network of partners — from community-based organizations to the departments of Mental Health and Public Social Services and others — to ensure families have access to the support they need and avoid having a case with us.

We have invested our time and funding in programs to help strengthen that community safety net, including the Hotline to Helpline initiative where families are connected to agencies in their communities straight from the county’s Child Protection Hotline, and Alternative Response Services, which connects families to a supportive agency after it is determined that the children involved are safe and the child abuse investigation is closed.

The agency then provides in-home support to help the family address their current challenges, which may include parenting struggles, relationship issues or an unaddressed history of trauma.

Any final thoughts you’d like to share?

While there’s always more to improve, it’s important to also celebrate how far we’ve come. To everyone involved in this work — thank you.