



# DCFS at Work Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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**Dr. Edward Liao, DCFS' medical director, is leading an effort to provide vital tools for social workers who support youth in foster care.**

## Increasing access to health, hope and harm reduction tools

Across the United States, the synthetic opioid fentanyl continues to fracture families and, in the worst cases, claim lives. In Los Angeles County, more than 2,400 people died from overdoses in 2024 — more than half of them from fentanyl. Among the fentanyl-related deaths, 1% were young people under 17.

While the number of youth in foster care directly affected remains relatively low, the risk to the county's 2 million children and youth is real. Social workers — who play a key role in supporting young people in foster care

during times of crisis — must therefore be equipped to facilitate families' access to critical care.

For Substance Abuse Awareness Month, we spoke with Dr. Edward Liao, medical director at the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Since joining the department in 2023, Dr. Liao has overseen the policies and systems that deliver health care to all children involved with DCFS, including providing social workers with tools and training in the event they need to intervene during an overdose for a youth in their care.

### What are your priorities as medical director?

It is my job to cultivate relationships between the department and other organizations and county departments to improve services and care coordination. My highest priority is to make sure there are strong systems in place that maximize the physical and mental health outcomes for children and youth involved with child welfare. This includes expanding access to substance-use treatment and educating our workforce on harm reduction.

### What are the most effective harm reduction strategies?

Harm reduction means decreasing the negative consequences of substance use. Because fentanyl has become prevalent and is a contaminant in many other illicit substances, having naloxone, commonly known as Narcan, in a home or personal emergency kit is super important because it is lifesaving and very simple to use — it's just a spray into the nostril. Another harm reduction strategy is testing for fentanyl, and we have fentanyl test strips available at all 20 DCFS regional offices.



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## How is DCFS preparing staff to handle overdose situations?

While the number of fentanyl overdose deaths among children 17 and under in Los Angeles County remains relatively small (13 cases last year), the rising trend in pediatric overdoses due to opioids over the past decade is concerning. We've partnered with the Department of Public Health (DPH) to help train social workers. Their Substance Abuse Prevention and Control (SAPC) website on harm reduction is a resource for staff and community members. For further engagement, I've also been visiting regional offices during staff meetings to talk directly with social workers and answer questions.



**“Naloxone, commonly known as Narcan, is lifesaving and very simple to use – it’s just a spray into the nostril,”** said Dr. Edward Liao, DCFS’ medical director.

## Looking to the future, is there something on the horizon you’re excited about?

One promising initiative is Plans of Safe Care, which provides support for infants who were exposed to substances before they were born and their parents by linking families to services and resources like substance use treatment programs, baby supplies, and someone to help them understand and access health care services. The program is being piloted by the Office of Child Protection at five Los Angeles County birthing hospitals, including Harbor-UCLA Medical Center and St. Francis Medical Center. The goal is to connect families to services in their community and to safely keep the mother and child together.

## What gives you hope in this work?

Our core mission is to help children and youth involved with child welfare live healthy lives — and we can’t do that alone. I am so grateful for our partnerships with DPH, the Department of Health Services and the Department of Mental Health. Their expertise and vision are essential in providing medical care, mental health services and substance use treatment. What gives me hope is the meaningful progress we’re making in supporting the health and well-being of the young people whose lives we are here to protect.