



DCFS at Work Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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DCFS' Multidisciplinary Assessment Team unifies county systems, professionals and families to work collaboratively when children and youth enter foster care.

The Human Impact of Multidisciplinary Assessments

Recognizing that unresolved trauma can destabilize the well-being of children and young people who enter foster care, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) evaluates the physical and emotional health of every child, from birth onward, upon entry.

Evaluations are conducted by professionals from DCFS, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and community-based providers — referred to as a Multidisciplinary Assessment Team (MAT) — with the

express purpose of identifying the child's strengths and needs early on, while also building relationships with caregivers, including grandparents and others providing temporary care until children can safely return home.

Moira Torres, a DCFS administrator who has been part of MAT since its inception more than 16 years ago, said the goal of the assessments is to discern what services and resources may be most helpful to the child and to ascertain whether they exist in their community.

"Success is when everyone is teaming around a child," said Moira, one of four managers who oversees the assessments. "When that happens, it's like an orchestra coming together."

Los Angeles County has invested more than \$100 million to enhance mental health services for children and families. Thousands of staff have been trained as part of these improvements, which were prompted by the now resolved, decades-old Katie A. class action lawsuit.

Assessments are especially important for identifying mental health needs early and swiftly connecting children to services and treatment, helping prevent trauma from causing physical, emotional or behavioral difficulties that could destabilize their living arrangement.



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Research shows that when children and families receive early, ongoing support tailored to their needs, foster home stability improves and children are more likely to have a safe, lasting family situation. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that youth can remain in stable foster homes long enough to safely reunify with their families. For example, the RAND Corporation's study Improving Child Welfare Outcomes highlights evidence that structured, service-linked interventions, such as programs that connect children and families to the right services early, are associated with greater stability and a higher likelihood of reunification.

Among those who have greatly benefitted from a MAT assessment is AC. At age 16, she arrived in the United States alone after living in refugee camps in Uganda. With her mother in another country and her father unable to care for her due to health limitations, AC was placed with a foster parent shortly after her arrival in Los Angeles County.

Through her assessment, AC was ultimately connected to trauma-focused mental health services intended to advance her healing journey. Now 19, she is a college student at a California State University and hopes to become a psychologist.

Moira explained that the impact of MAT assessments is particularly profound for youth entering care who are experiencing higher levels of trauma, more severe mental health needs and greater challenges with traditional services. By identifying complex needs early, MAT lays the foundation for a more stable and supportive trajectory for a child's long-term well-being in foster care.

Shano Palovich Rodgers, who joined the unit as a manager a decade ago, recalled the case of a 9-year-old boy who had recently entered foster care. During a MAT assessment, it was discovered that the child was crying himself to sleep every night, an insight that revealed significant emotional distress.

Captured early, this information shifted how his case was handled, and the boy was ultimately placed with a relative, where his trauma could be acknowledged and customized steps could be taken to properly address his needs. "Having a MAT assessment early on can make such a difference," Shano said.

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-Moira Torres