



DCFS at Work Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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Will Park focuses on day-to-day interactions with families as a micro intern with DCFS' Asian Pacific Program.

A Tale of Two Internships: Micro and Macro

Will Park didn't plan on becoming a social worker. A former film production major, he left behind commercial work in search of something more meaningful.

Now a Master of Social Work intern from California State University, Los Angeles, Park is placed in the Asian Pacific Program (APP) at the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), where he works directly with families navigating challenges.

Park is among 138 interns across DCFS, split between two distinct but connected areas: micro and macro practice. Of those, 110 micro interns work directly with children and families, while 28 macro interns focus on

systems, policy and leadership. Both paths require compassion, fortitude and a commitment to public service. Since 2013, more than 2,500 interns have completed the program, which recently celebrated its 35th anniversary.

"There are a lot of different options and paths within DCFS and it's really important to find the one that fits you," Park said, adding that he hopes to join APP full-time as a social worker after graduating in May.

As an intern, his days are dynamic and individualized: morning calls with schools and service providers, followed by afternoon home visits for assessments, follow-ups and connecting families with local partner agencies.

In one case, Park responded to a report that a parent had bitten a 6-year-old child, an allegation that triggered an investigation. But when he arrived, the reality was far different. The child, newly immigrated from China, hadn't been able to fully explain the situation to a school administrator, who, Park said, "acted too quickly." He called it a clear example of information "lost in translation."

In Mandarin — one of seven Asian languages social workers use in the APP section to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate child welfare services — Park helped connect the family to a regional center and other services, easing their introduction into an unfamiliar system.

"You meet a lot of people who are resistant to working with the department or just have no idea of what can result from an investigation," he said. "I think that the work that we do to build trust with families can really help in the long term."



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Moments like this define micro practice: deeply human, often time-intensive and rarely visible.

Through his internship, Park said he has strengthened his ability to communicate with families who may be hesitant or unsure about the department's role.

Overseeing both internship tracks is Martha Herrera Salgado, who began her own career as a DCFS intern in 1996. Today, she leads the Education and Licensure Section, which partners with 12 universities and supports employees pursuing degrees in social work.

"Our goal is to increase the number of highly skilled social workers," she said. "Having the hands-on experience, like shadowing a social worker, that's invaluable."

At DCFS headquarters, Vanessa Cervantes is gaining experience interning at a systems level; one that shapes policies guiding cases like Park's. A seven-year DCFS employee, Cervantes is now pursuing her Master's in Social Work at California State University, Long Beach, while splitting her time between frontline support and legislative analysis.

Early in the week, she works in the Resource Family Support Division as a social worker, assessing living environments and confirming that families and caregivers have access to the tools they need to provide safe, nurturing homes. Later, she shifts to the Government and Legislative Relations (GLR) Section for her internship.

On any given day at GLR, she may review proposed legislation, analyze policy language or draft talking points for executive leadership. The work is fast-paced and detail-driven, requiring clarity, confidence and collaboration. From supporting advocacy work for expanded safe surrender laws to addressing gaps in assistance for adoptive families, including helping close a loophole in a resource parent support bill that had been discouraging adoptions, she said her firsthand experiences are helping inform legislative decisions.

"My internship has really opened my eyes about the value of social workers' input; they are out there talking to the children and families, and they are seeing what's going on," Cervantes said. "At the micro level, we are genuinely impacting families and children, and I see how that frontline experience can shape better systems."

