



DCFS at Work Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

October 14, 2026 - Volume 7, Edition 10



Ariana Ruiz deepened her passion for social work through her internship at DCFS.

The future is hiring: County internships open doors

Ariana Ruiz, 21, used to wake up 10 minutes before class.

While pursuing her bachelor's degree in psychology at California State University, Northridge, she often felt like she was running behind; not because she lacked commitment, but because she hadn't yet developed the structure and discipline to feel in control of her time.

Then, last fall, she began an internship with the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). She started arriving at least 15 minutes before her shift at the Van Nuys Regional Office, where she assisted staff with clerical work and shadowed social workers during family visits. By the time she graduated

from college in May, she had developed a new routine, becoming more organized, dependable and intentional about her responsibilities.

"I feel like this job has changed me," Ariana said. "It shaped me into more of an adult."

That is the transformative power at the heart of DCFS' Youth Worker Intern Program. The paid, 12-month internship offers current and former youth in care, ages 16-20, working knowledge of public sector operations with no college experience required. Interns benefit from mentorship and transferable skills training, including computer proficiency, professional communication and workplace etiquette.

The program is one of several [Los Angeles County investments](#) designed to boost the workforce marketability of young people as they move toward financial independence. Other county programs for youth include [Career Development Internships](#), the [Countywide Youth Bridges Program](#), the Student Worker Program and the [Academic Internship Program](#).

For youth leaving foster care, a pathway into the workforce can be a particularly important step toward independence. Last year, [866 young people exited foster care](#) in Los Angeles County after opting out of continued services or reaching the age limit for extended foster care. The Annie E. Casey Foundation identifies housing instability, unemployment and academic challenges as [key barriers](#) young people may face during this transition.



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For Ariana, who completed the program last month, the internship at DCFS also helped solidify her goal of becoming a social worker.

“This internship is truly a blessing,” she said. “It has opened my eyes to everything, how I view things. I’ve learned a lot and made a lot of connections.”

Establishing and sustaining those relationships is an intentional part of the learning process, according to JacQueline Bowen, who has overseen the program since 2018.

In addition to recruiting and interviewing youth — last year there were around 300 applicants for 17 positions — JacQueline works with regional offices to establish intern roles and stays closely involved with all participants throughout the program. At monthly meetings, interns share their experiences, support one another and develop bonds with peers navigating similar transitions. The sessions also reinforce workplace fundamentals like respectful communication, email etiquette and professional attire.

“It helps them to understand the power of not doing life alone; how important it is to have a circle of people who support you,” JacQueline said.

For Marissa Alvarez, 27, who interned in the DCFS Office of Strategic Communications (then called the Office of Public Affairs) from 2019-20, that sense of connection helped shape a path that eventually brought her back to the department.

“The internship was my first step into a real job,” said Marissa, who worked 20 hours a week creating graphics and social media content infused with her lived expertise and staffing events like the department’s annual Quinceañera celebration.

“It was life-changing because it gave me a taste of what the workforce is like,” said Marissa, who is now raising her 6-year-old daughter and lives in Fullerton.

Today, she works in the reception area of DCFS’ Santa Fe Springs Office. Drawing on her own experiences in foster care, she sees her interactions with young people as an opportunity to make a difference.

“I feel like I’m giving back,” Marissa said, reflecting on the journey that began with an internship. “I see myself working here until I retire.”



DCFS clerk Marissa Alvarez began her county career in 2020 as a Youth Worker Intern in the department’s Office of Strategic Communications.