



Safe children
Stable families
Supportive
communities

GOING BEYOND THE VISION

A report on **child welfare in America**



Community Medicine: A child welfare system extends its reach to all South Los Angeles families in need

Across the street from a city park and kitty-corner to a community center, a rooster crows long after dawn already has broken, its racket beating against an apartment window protected by burglary bars and draped with a Mexican flag.

Near the intersection of two wide boulevards clogged with traffic, the old Academy Theater is easy to spot because of its slim cylindrical tower. A church moved into the one-time movie house years ago, offering healing, deliverance and miracle services.

Where once stood burned-out hulls of buildings destroyed during the 1992 riots, signs of rebirth are evident. But harsh realities impede community progress.

The community of South Los Angeles sprawls across several neighborhoods and a handful of cities, the most recognizable of which are Watts and Compton. Three in every 10 households in South Los Angeles live in poverty. Three in every 10 adults over age 25 have less than a ninth-grade education. The high school graduation rate is 35 percent. More than 300,000 crimes are committed in a year.

The South Los Angeles community also has a high number of child welfare cases. In 2009, nearly 25,000 children in the community were the subject of a child welfare referral, according to the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. Those referrals led to 2,220 children being removed from their homes. At any one time, about 3,600 children in South Los Angeles are in foster care.

The ultimate obligation of child welfare systems is to protect children from danger. But that is not accomplished solely by reacting to child maltreatment that already has occurred. To ensure the safety of America's children and build stable families, the condition of the communities in which they live must be addressed.

An innovative program is under way in South Los Angeles that may signal the future of child welfare in the United States.

It's a future where children are kept safe because their families have received the help they need before any abuse or neglect takes place. It's a future where families receive the support and learn the skills they need so that children can be raised safely and successfully at home – and within the communities they call home.

And it's a future where communities can thrive by drawing strength from the children and families they serve.

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This new approach in child welfare is benefiting the entire South Los Angeles community by aiming to stop child neglect and abuse in their tracks. The project is made possible in part because Los Angeles County has a Title IV-E waiver, which gives child welfare systems more flexibility to spend federal child welfare dollars on services other than foster care – such as those aimed at

preventing child maltreatment and moving children in foster care into permanent homes.

The Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project (PIDP) serves not only families with open child welfare cases but also those in the community who never have come into contact with the system. Those latter families, however, are at a high risk to enter the system unless they receive help raising their children.

“This kind of a program diverts children from foster care while strengthening the communities we serve,” said Blanca Vega, assistant regional administrator for the Department of Children and Family Services office in Compton.

PIDP is a countywide project funded through an investment of \$10 million. Casey Family Programs has supported the project through consultation, research and technical assistance.

The project takes on different forms within the various parts of Los Angeles County, based on individual community needs. In South Los Angeles, it is managed by SHIELDS for Families, a nonprofit with deep community ties, which it has used to build a broad network of PIDP resources.

“Instead of having systems that are set up to keep families apart, we should be investing in services that are helping keep families together,” said Kathryn Icenhower, SHIELDS executive director.

SHIELDS opened four ASK (Ask, Seek, Knock) Family Resource Centers throughout South Los Angeles as places for families to receive the services they need to raise their children safely and successfully. Each family resource center has a staff person, or “resource navigator,” who guides families through the social services maze to make sure they get the support they need.

The family resource centers are well embedded within South Los Angeles. One is inside the Avalon-Carver Community Center, which has been a part of the community since 1940. Another is run through West Angeles Church of God in Christ, which has more than 22,000 congregants.

Families are more likely to walk into a church or community center to ask for services than they would be if the centers were billed as part of the child welfare system, said Ron Taylor, resource navigator at the West Angeles Church family resource center.

“Most people aren’t going to ask the Department of Children and Family Services for whatever help they need

Supportive communities help create stable families.



Geron Flynn (standing), vocational coordinator for SHIELDS for Families, teaches a high school equivalency course at the ASK Family Resource Center in Lynwood, Calif.

to raise their children,” he said. “This way, families can be comfortable that their coming in won’t result in a child welfare case being opened on them. Some don’t even realize that the center is connected to the system. They just know they went somewhere and got the help they needed.”

Needs have varied among the 8,400 South Los Angeles families that have sought services through the family resource centers as of March 2011. The majority of families come in asking for food or clothing for their children, including baby formula and diapers. Some seek safe housing or assistance with paying rent. Others need beds so their children don’t have to sleep on the floor.

About 75 percent of those served by family resource centers have been parents with no active child welfare case but who need help raising their children safely and successfully.

Rita Espino falls within that 75 percent. She walked into a family resource center needing food and a stove so she could prepare proper meals for her four children, who range in age from 4 to 14. During her first meeting with the PIDP navigator, she was so worried for her children that she broke down in tears. With enough food and a new stove, the children now eat well – and they eat together, each night, as a family.

“Once I am finished cooking, everyone sits at the kitchen table, we say a prayer to thank God and then we eat,” Espino said.

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Some services are provided directly at the family resource centers, including parenting classes, computer proficiency training, high school equivalency courses and tutoring for children. PIDP also helps parents who are seeking vocational training so they can earn steady work and therefore raise their children safely and successfully.

Leslie Hemsley, who is raising 4-year-old Leslie Jr. by himself, has begun taking a fiber optics cable technician certification course offered free of charge.

“Becoming a father made me a man,” said Hemsley, 26. “My son is my heart, my pride, my joy. He is everything to me. I’m trying to move up in life so I can take better care of him. Without him, I don’t know what I’d do. Every night, I think about it. I think about losing him. That’s why I am really trying to learn a trade. It’s for him.”

Hemsley, an immigrant from Belize, also is receiving legal aid through PIDP to help obtain a work permit. SHIELDS for Families estimates that more than 1,000 residents so far have received some sort of pro bono legal services through PIDP.

Hemsley said his PIDP navigator, Sharron Eason, has been a blessing for him and his son.

“When I met Sharron, I felt like a weight was lifted off me,” he said. “If I have any questions, I just call her and she guides me to what I need.”

The fiber optics certification program has trained hundreds of single fathers just like Hemsley. Most have no active child welfare case but suffer from economic and other stresses that put the family at risk of entering the system. A group of former students even formed a support group for single dads.

“This is what we mean when we talk about building community,” said Audrey Tousant, PIDP program manager for SHIELDS. “They are making their own social networks outside of – but as a result of – the services we are providing.”

According to SHIELDS, many graduates of the fiber optics program have found jobs in the field and been promoted to supervisor level, earning salaries of \$60,000 to \$75,000 a year, plus benefits. A few have started their own companies in cable and computer repair.

About one-third of last January’s graduating class of 27 students had jobs lined up even before they received their certificates. A formal graduation ceremony took place at one of the family resource centers, attended by spouses, parents and children of the students. A few graduates carried their babies in their arms as they accepted their certificates.

“You cannot put a price on that kind of pride, that kind of excitement,” said Vega, the assistant regional administrator for the county child welfare department. “To see their families there with them, also beaming with pride – I couldn’t help but think that with that kind of support, we’ll never see these families enter our system. Ever.”

