

## Spotlight on our partners

### *Using Upfront Assessments to Provide Better Services to Families*

SHIELDS for Families, Inc., one of nine original Family Preservation Programs (FPP) in Los Angeles County, has been providing child welfare services to families in Compton, Watts and surrounding areas since 1992. SHIELDS was instrumental in the design and development of FPP policies and procedures, and the implementation of FPP services. Over the first four years of the program, the number of children from the city of Compton who were placed in foster care decreased by 29%. As a result of this early success, SHIELDS' was selected to implement several pilot programs in Compton, including Families First (Alternative Response) and the Point of Engagement Service Delivery System. Both have become prototypes for Los Angeles County and have assisted in decreasing the out-of-home placement rate by 31%.

SHIELDS is a comprehensive, community-based agency, annually serving 3000 families residing in South Central Los Angeles. It has 28 programs located in the communities of Compton and Watts and it's primary goals are to: (1) promote family reunification and support families remaining intact in the community; (2) strengthen families through the provision of comprehensive and collaborative services; (3) improve the general well being of families through comprehensive health programs and preventive social services; and (4) promote self sufficiency and economic independence.

In 2004 SHIELDS began providing

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### **Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services Flexible Funding Reinvestment:**

#### *A Proactive Approach to Meeting Children's and Families' Needs*

Participating in the Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project has been a positive experience for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and its community partners, as children continue to be safely returned to their families, and the time required to find children safe permanent homes with caring adults has been shortened. During the first year of the Waiver, which began July 1, 2007, DCFS used its modest capped allocation flexible funding to expand three initiatives that improve safety and strengthen healthy connections between children, families and communities: Team Decision Making; Family finding and engagement; and Upfront assessments for mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence. By the end of the Project's first year, DCFS and the Department of Probation generated \$28.9 million in reinvestment funds; this was accomplished even as the nation began to experience one of the worst financial crises in decades and families began feeling the effects of the recession.

#### **Keeping the Momentum Going During the Recession**

With the recent announcement that the United States has been in a recession since December 2007, concern has mounted that the economic downturn could result in increased maltreatment and larger caseloads for family maintenance and out-of-home care. DCFS reforms have been essential to maintaining positive outcomes for children and families during the first year of the downturn and must be built upon to ensure child safety and well being throughout the recession. By keeping the reform momentum going, we can continue to produce additional reinvestment funds to support the needs of children and families even in the midst of the economic crisis.

- The good news is that the DCFS foster care census is still decreasing. Trend data for the past seven years show that the foster care census did not increase or decrease in correlation to the unemployment rate in Los Angeles County. This is important to note, since the unemployment rate has increased sharply from 6.6% in May 2008 to a high of 11.4% in May 2009.
- While the most recent caseload data are reassuring, there is still cause for concern about the impact of the recession on children and families. This downturn is more severe than any other in recent years, and family and community stressors have increased with potential repercussions difficult to predict.

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Upfront Assessments in collaboration with two DCFS offices: Compton and Wateridge utilizing the Point of Engagement Service Delivery System. SHIELDS staff work directly with DCFS Emergency Response staff when a high-risk family is identified through a child abuse/neglect investigation. Master's and Doctoral level clinical staff meet with caregivers in the home and conduct upfront assessments by utilizing a standardized tool to assess for areas of dysfunction. Often, assessments find that families are faced with domestic violence, mental health, substance abuse, occupational, and other concerns that may render an environment unsafe for their children. By quickly linking families to services, DCFS may not have to remove the children from their homes.

Since the inception of Point of Engagement, more than 1700 upfront assessments have been completed and only forty-five cases resulted in detention post-assessment. Of these cases, 38% addressed mental health concerns, 6% addressed substance abuse, 4% addressed domestic violence, and 52% comprised two or more of these issues.

We spoke with SHIELDS Executive Director, Dr. Kathryn Icenhower about upfront assessments for our first Spotlight on Our Community Partners column.

#### **DCFS: How do upfront assessments help families?**

*Dr. Kathryn Icenhower (KI):* Upfront assessments help families by evaluating caregiver issues and needed services, in collaboration with the DCFS Emergency Response Worker, prior to placement determination. In this process, families are linked to service(s) indicated, typically during the time of assessment. Clinical staff also attend the family Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings and assist with the development of a family safety plan.

#### **DCFS: What makes your work unique?**

*KI:* Upfront assessments are unique because Licensed Masters or Doctoral level mental health professionals administer the assessments in the family's home. Additionally, the assessment protocol is standardized and addresses the major domains of functioning. While DCFS focuses their assessment on risk to the child's safety, the upfront assessment focuses on the caregiver(s) capability to care for the child, including both strengths and challenges; it helps to identify the extent of the problem(s) the caregivers are facing. In doing so, DCFS receives additional information that helps in determining the best plan for the family.

#### **DCFS: Have you seen any changes in the way DCFS is doing business?**

*KI:* We have seen a marked difference in how DCFS

conducts business. In the past, DCFS lacked a structured approach for providing services to families. Without expert input on issues involving mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence, children of high-risk families were often detained immediately and services to the family may not have been put in place until months afterward, if at all. Now, DCFS approaches families respectfully and quickly evaluates their needs. TDM meetings provide an opportunity for families to be engaged in case planning and linked to more appropriate services faster.

#### **DCFS: What are your greatest challenges?**

*KI:* The greatest challenge that SHIELDS has encountered is recruiting mental health professionals who have the cultural competence to work with the families served in our community. Also, obtaining community resources for indigent and/or monolingual Spanish-speaking families has often been an obstacle to expedient and appropriate services. Even in situations where families qualify for services, access is often impeded by agencies' waiting lists and policies.

#### **DCFS: What are your greatest rewards?**

*KI:* The greatest reward is seeing families remain intact and receive the help they need to stay together.

#### **DCFS: What advice can you give others who want to provide these services?**

*KI:* Our advice is to just do it! The reward of seeing families able to stay together is worth all the hard work it takes to run an effective and efficient program.

#### **DCFS: How do you see this evolving in the future?**

*KI:* We hope to expand the number of assessments we are able to provide. Our agency has recently begun working with the DCFS Command Post to provide upfront assessment services for the referrals they receive. SHIELDS has provided training on conducting upfront assessments to other mental health providers in hopes that they will expand services in their Service Planning Areas (SPA).

#### **DCFS: What impact will you have on the future of your SPA?**

*KI:* Since the implementation of the Point of Engagement Service Delivery System in Compton (SPA 6), out-of-home placement rates have been significantly reduced, and the amount of time children are in out-of-home care has been reduced to less than a year; data indicate that previous average out-of-home placements were close to two years or more. It is our hope that the outcomes for families in our SPA will continue to improve with the expansion of Point of Engagement services. ■

- The DCFS reform emphasis on community engagement and family support has been at the core of recent child welfare improved outcomes: a steady decline in the out-of-home care caseload in the past five years, a decrease in child abuse recurrence rates and more familial ties and supports for thousands of children in Los Angeles County.
- Investing now in more community resources and family support is a crucial part of keeping this momentum going. An opportunity exists for proactive use of the flexible funding reinvestment to expand community-based services to help families before crises overwhelm their ability to parent. In the second sequence of reinvestment, we therefore propose to invest over 80% of funds in community-based services and supports.
- Joining the capped allocation flexible funding demonstration project six months before the longest recession since 1982 has allowed DCFS to meet the real and emerging needs of children and families. The terms of the project require the State to provide the capped allocation to the County through June 2012, with a growth factor of 2% each year for most of this revenue. Since the terms of the agreement require that any reinvestment be spent on child welfare services, the County is able to provide more crucial resources at a very critical time.

Mindful of this situation, DCFS is utilizing its second sequence reinvestment funds to keep the momentum going and improve the protection of children and stability of families, as follows:

**Up-front Assessments for High-Risk Families on Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Domestic Violence** – To reduce entries into foster care and help parents who need services to expedite reunification, additional Family Preservation (FP) agencies will provide 5,000 expert upfront assessments annually of high risk referrals involving mental health, substance abuse and/or domestic violence; participate in Team Decision Meetings (TDM's); and provide FP and Alternative Response Services (ARS) to 500 additional families across all regional offices. This will allow for immediate, comprehensive assessments and much faster linkages to treatment and ancillary services for parents in the community. Three administrators will be hired to manage the expansion, including oversight of FP contracts.

**Countywide Prevention Efforts, Such as Differential Response** – The Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project (PIDP) will continue providing a more comprehensive array of services, resources and supports to participating families; and increasing relationships/partnerships between DCFS and community agencies. With Differential Response (DR), appropriate Child Protection Hotline (CPHL) referrals will be diverted to community agencies before family needs escalate and child safety becomes a concern, so families can access services, activities and supports. This will increase shared responsibility for child safety in the community and decrease the number of referrals to regional offices.

**Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF)** – Funds will be provided to avoid cutting contracts in the middle of the year due to federal cuts, in FY 2008-09 only:

- **Family Support** to strengthen families and reduce the number of entries into foster care. Family Support services provided by community-based agencies promote child and family well-being, by increasing family strength and stability and increasing parents' confidence and competence.
- **Family Preservation** services to reduce the number of entries into foster care and shorten reunification timelines. Family Preservation Agency services support and preserve families who are at risk or experiencing problems in family functioning, with the goal of assuring children reside in safe and nurturing environments.
- **Time Limited Family Reunification Services** to shorten reunification timelines by accessing alcohol and drug assessment and treatment for eligible DCFS families.
- **Adoption Promotion Services and Support (APSS)** to shorten timelines to permanency by expediting the adoption process and supporting adoptive families. Community-based agencies provide information, therapy, support groups and linkages to services.

**Regional Office Community Partnering** - Funds will be provided to DCFS regional offices to deepen collaborative work with community partners on key reforms such as eliminating racial disparity and disproportionality, and expanding child abuse and neglect prevention services.

**Expansion of Team Decision Making (TDM)** conferences to identify safe alternative plans and services for families investigated for child abuse or neglect at night and on weekends by the Emergency Response Command Post (ERCP). Eight additional TDM facilitators and a supervising manager will be hired as part of the Board approved Katie A. Strategic Plan.

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**Expansion of Family Finding and Engagement** to provide high-needs youth with stability and increased connections and permanency. With 9 additional social workers and 3 support staff, the specialized Youth Permanency (YP) Units established in Metro North and Pomona offices with reduced caseloads of 15 and special training will expand to 6 social workers each, and a YP Unit will be added in Santa Clarita.

## **Strengthening Community Partnerships!**

Serving the children and families in Los Angeles County requires partnership efforts, and DCFS is committed to strengthening its partnerships with the community! To expand and build upon community partnerships, five convenings were held across the County during the month of May. The convenings were very well received, and the Department is extremely grateful to all who participated, including DCFS staff and partners from a wide variety of public and private agencies that work on behalf of children and families.

In the morning, the convenings utilized an experiential Wraparound Child and Family Team meeting skit to demonstrate how engagement and teamwork can best meet the needs of children and families. Table discussions followed with a report out to the larger group. Later, DCFS and the community teamed together to present two sessions of a wide variety of workshops, including those addressing Team Decision Making, Icebreakers, Parents in Partnership, Upfront Assessments, Domestic Violence in the Community, Linkages, the Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project (PIDP), Mental Health Collaboration, Kinship Care Supportive Services and Collaborations, Restoring Families through Partnership Relations, Relationship Community Organizing, Teaming Approach to Purposeful Visitation, and Family Visitation with Community Partners.

Following the workshops, one of the convenings focused on Eliminating Racial Disparity and Disproportionality (ERDD). The other four convenings chose to have DCFS staff and community partners meet together as regional offices or Service Planning Areas (SPA) to discuss their top partnering successes and challenges and action steps to keep the partnership momentum going. Based on the success of these convenings, DCFS plans to engage its community partners in planning for additional regional convenings within the year.

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