

Stories of Practice Change:

# What Flexible Funding Means to the Children and Families of Los Angeles County



February 2009





*...Transformation happens less by arguing cogently for something new than by generating active, ongoing practices that shift a culture's experience of the basis for reality.*



—The Art of Possibility,  
by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander

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## Introduction

A 17-year-old youth sat on the stairs of his home in Los Angeles, absorbed in an intense discussion with Randolph Hardeman, a social worker from the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). For years, the youth and his brother, 18, had cycled through group homes and foster care placements. A year before, they had re-established contact with two young adult siblings, and moved in with them and two children, ages 3 and 4.

But the young family had been evicted. Struggling to find an affordable home where they could remain together, they kept running up against the hard fact that few landlords want to rent to four people under 25 with two preschoolers.

At one point in his conversation with the 17-year-old that day, Hardeman mentioned the possibility of removal if the family was unable to find adequate housing. Hardeman describes the youth's reaction: "There was this look on his face. His heart was broken. He asked, 'Do you think you will be able to put me back with my family? I waited my whole life to find my family.'"

Child welfare social workers deal in hopes, dreams and tragedies like this every day. There are no bar graphs to capture the essence of the listening and support they offer to thousands of children and families, each with their own story. In this case, Hardeman helped the family find another home to rent, and they were able to stay together. DCFS cases for the two brothers are expected to close in 2009.

Searching for housing for his clients is not an explicit part of Hardeman's job description, of course, but he is committed to finding stable, safe and permanent connections for the youth on his caseload. If that means helping them find housing, his job is flexible.

What made the difference in this case is that Hardeman is a Children's Social Worker (CSW) in Metro North's Youth Permanency Unit, a special division of social workers who carry lower caseloads and focus on finding permanent connections for high-risk youth who usually have spent years in the system. What also made the difference is that Hardeman's unit is supported through a waiver from the federal government that gives DCFS flexibility over how they use their federal and state matching foster care funds and how they invest any savings that are achieved. Without this flexibility, DCFS would be required to spend their foster care dollars only on out-of-home placement. Without this reinvestment, Hardeman might never have met the two brothers in this case, and they probably would have remained in a group home until they "aged out" of the system at age 18, whether or not they were prepared to live as independent adults.

## Child Welfare in Context

In the past, many child welfare agencies, especially large ones, were seen as "rescue" agents—or worse, "baby snatchers"—known more for removing children from family settings that were seen as unsafe than for services to help families stabilize and stay together. This was a traditional philosophy driven by high caseloads, the urgency of safety and federal funding streams that offered support only when children were placed.

At least removal would ensure safety, the argument went. And it did, most of the time. But this approach won agencies few fans among parents who needed help with mental health problems or substance abuse or domestic violence. It won few fans among youth who languished in multiple placements, separated from their siblings, communities and schools. It won few fans among community providers who were potential allies in an effort to support families safely in their own homes and neighborhoods. It also won few fans from social workers and their supervisors who knew this was not the helping profession for which they trained.

Child welfare leaders across the country are delivering a different message now. To be sure, safety and protection of children remain paramount concerns of DCFS and other agencies. But their approach is shifting from relying primarily on out-of-home care to providing support for families and children in their own homes with community-based services specifically tailored to each family's needs. When a child must be removed, DCFS now seeks quicker timelines to permanency, primarily through reunification with parents, or if that is not possible, placement with relatives or other extended family members, or through adoption or guardianship. The bottom line is a basic one: Children should not grow up in a foster care system. All children deserve safe, permanent and nurturing families.

## Flexibility in Spending

To help support this new direction, California applied for and received a five-year waiver from federal government spending restrictions. The waiver, a capped allocation of federal and state funds with a 2 percent increase each year, was approved in March 2006. It did not provide new money, but the two counties that chose to participate—Los Angeles and Alameda—have freedom in how they spend the money.

For DCFS, the waiver made sense. Leaders already were working successfully to lower their placement rates and shift the balance of services on the child welfare continuum. They knew that if they could save funds through an ongoing decrease in placements, they would be able to reinvest in more supportive programs for families and children and keep the trend going. The terms of the waiver explicitly required that savings be reinvested in child welfare services.

Throughout 2008, despite a growing state and national economic crisis, DCFS continued to safely reduce the number of children in temporary out-of-home care. By the end of January 2009, there were 16,429 children in care, down from 18,304 when the waiver was formally inaugurated in July 2007. (And down from almost 50,000 just a decade or so ago.)

This report is part of an ongoing series to document the reforms and lessons learned as DCFS takes its 7,000-strong staff to a new level of helping children and families in Los Angeles County. The reports are sponsored by Casey Family Programs (CFP), a national operating foundation based in Seattle that partners with numerous states and counties to help public agencies better support families and children in their own communities and safely decrease their foster care population.

This report tells the story of three DCFS practice strategies implemented and expanded in 2008 under flexible funding made possible by the waiver. It is based on a year's worth of research, observation and interviews with those who champion the work. It is the story of workers and supervisors who are leading change by doing it; of DCFS managers with open-door policies to steer the effort; of families, children and community leaders who are beginning to see DCFS in a new light.

## First-Year Waiver Strategies: A Focus on Practice Change

Practice change was underway at DCFS before the waiver was approved, but the waiver money gave leaders permission to deepen, expand and learn from three strategies during the first year:

- **Expansion of Up-Front Assessments and corresponding intensive home-based services to prevent unnecessary placement in foster care. This strategy includes a specialized assessment to identify the needs of parents and caregivers with problems concerning substance abuse, domestic violence and/or mental health, and to advance their connection to needed services.**
- **Establishment of specialized Youth Permanency Units in three offices to focus on finding and engaging family members to provide permanent, life-long family connections to children and youth in long-term care, who are those most at risk of aging out of the system without connections.**
- **Expansion of family Team Decision-Making conferences (TDM), a strategy that brings family members and others important to the family together with social workers and other service providers for facilitated meetings in which they plan for the children's future. Under the waiver, DCFS hired 14 new TDM facilitators to focus on permanency planning conferences for youth in long-term foster care or group homes.**

To learn as much as possible about the impact of the waiver and how it fits in with other reforms, the state, county and Casey Family Programs are supporting an innovative package of evaluations.

## Point of Engagement and Expansion of Up-Front Assessments



*It was clear to us some 80 percent of the children and families that we serve are grappling with one or more of the three issues: substance abuse, domestic violence and mental health. We were addressing those, but way too late—sometimes 30 or more days after we opened a referral. Then there were waiting lists for services, and sometimes families or children did not get assistance for months. We wanted to make sure they got a quick assessment, and we wanted to make sure they received immediate intervention and services. So we focused on building community capacity to meet those needs. It was a logical sequence of events.”*



—Trish Ploehn, Director, DCFS

Point of Engagement (POE) is a service-delivery approach that engages families as partners and responds to referrals with specific and targeted community-based services as soon as possible. A hallmark component of POE is a voluntary assessment of caregivers to identify both the strengths and concerns around their ability to care for their children safely and to help determine the services that are needed.

## Getting Started

POE and the use of voluntary assessments evolved from a problem, a question and a place:

**The problem** was a disconnect between the emergency response to a hotline call and getting needed services for parents. Eric Marts, Deputy Director for Service Bureau 2, explained: “If you don’t have that link between emergency response and services at the very beginning of the system and those families have a gap in service, many of them get lost in the system. Some of them give up. They’re in crisis, and crisis is the best time to catch them.”

**The question** was one that managers asked their emergency response workers: What would help you on the front end to meet the immediate needs of parents and prevent children coming into the system? Their answer was: Help assessing the severity of problems around mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence and identifying services to help parents deal with these problems immediately.

**The place** was Compton, where visionary leadership within DCFS met visionary leadership in the community and came together to develop a new way of working with families.

Many see Compton as a city of extensive poverty, high unemployment, crime, drugs, gang violence and one of the highest out-of-home placement rates in Los Angeles County. To Eric Marts, Compton provided an opportunity to support parents and address placement. Marts was regional administrator for the Compton office when DCFS began a pilot aimed at safely reducing the number of children taken from their homes in the community. He was interested in addressing the trend of disproportionate representation of African American children in the system, which was particularly problematic in Compton.

SHIELDS for Families, Inc., founded in 1991 and based in Compton, is a nonprofit that offers comprehensive family-based services around substance abuse, mental health and domestic violence issues. SHIELDS began working with DCFS in 1992, providing in-home family preservation services. When POE was piloted in 2004, SHIELDS was ready to lead the effort on the community end. The work SHIELDS and DCFS did together on POE and Up-Front Assessments gave DCFS the evidence to expand the Up-Front Assessments under the waiver.

## Up-Front Assessments: The Practice

As part of POE, Up-Front Assessments are conducted as soon as possible after a hotline referral is made so that emergency response workers have the best information with which to make decisions about removal.

### **The process works as follows:**

- An upfront assessment is recommended when an emergency response worker suspects a problem connected with mental health, substance abuse or domestic violence and needs additional expertise to determine the degree of the problem.
- An assessment is not made if a safety issue indicates immediate removal or if the hotline allegation is unfounded.
- The assessment is voluntary. If the parent agrees to the assessment, a trained clinician from a community-service organization goes to the home no later than 48 hours after the referral.
- The assessment is an expanded bio/psycho/social analysis that looks at seven major areas of functioning: physical health, mental health, substance use, educational and occupational functioning, social relationships, domestic violence/domestic relationships and criminal activity. The assessor uses a computer-based, online tool called a Behavioral Severity Assessment Program (BSAP) and interviews each caregiver

separately. The assessment is comprehensive, looking at strengths as well as needs, and often taking two hours or more to complete. SHIELDS' supervisor and program manager Trevor Daniels explained: "You have to get a full understanding about the dynamics of a family's world. You have to understand people's functional level, and whether there's a risk to the kids because of their parents' problems."

- The assessors do not make recommendations about placement. Removal—or not—is the responsibility of DCFS. Rather the assessor talks to the family and to DCFS about the results of the assessment and makes recommendations to DCFS for services.
- DCFS makes the decision about removal and services. Because the agency conducting the assessments is a community provider with expertise in domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse, and because it has information on what the caregivers really need, it can start services right away.
- Ideally, a TDM meeting takes place soon after the assessment, and the community agency participates with family members, DCFS and others in determining a plan of action.

## Case Story: Up-Front Assessments at the Command Post

The Emergency Response Command Post handles hotline referrals from across the county that come in after hours and on weekends and holidays. They receive an average of 50 hotline referrals a day, a heavy load for a total staff of 78 CSWs and 12 supervisors. They respond to the middle-of-the-night emergencies, and it is no surprise that the Command Post was responsible for up to 30 percent of the removals in the county. The use of Up-Front Assessments at the Command Post could make a big difference in the county's overall out-of-home placement rate.

In May 2008, Children's Institute Inc. (CII), a service organization with more than 100 years of experience in Los Angeles, began working with the Command Post under a grant from the Marguerite Casey Foundation. An assessor from CII is assigned to the Command Post on weekend nights and stands ready to go out and conduct an assessment at a moment's notice.

On a weekend in mid-January 2009, CII's assessor Frank Nessary, a psychologist and clinician, conducted an assessment with the mother of a 1-year-old girl suffering from asthma. The baby was at the home of her father, and the case had been reported to the hotline for inadequate medical care. Her parents were separated and contesting custody. Given the history—a previous open case, indications of domestic violence, possible drug abuse and some mental health issues—the supervisor determined an up-front assessment would yield valuable information.

The CSW who responded to the hotline call removed the baby from the father for neglecting her medical needs and took her to the mother's home. The worker explained the assessment process to the mother and got her permission to proceed with the interview. Nessary arrived shortly before midnight and interviewed the mother, using the computerized BSAP methodology. The assessment found a pattern of domestic violence in the family and indicated that services would help both the mother and the baby. As a service provider, CII was prepared to start working with the mother within a week. A TDM was scheduled. DCFS did not feel the need to separate the baby from the mother.

As Nessary said later, "We got a lot of information in a short amount of time and in the middle of the night. The assessment showed that the domestic violence was not a one-time event, but a build-up of a number of incidents. It helped us link this mother and her baby to services quickly. And it meant the baby did not have to be put in foster care."



## The Benefits of Up-Front Assessments

It is impossible to escape the enthusiasm about the POE approach and the critical role of Up-Front Assessments if you talk to those who are using them. They see it as a win/win/win situation for DCFS, the families, and the community.

Where the philosophy of POE and its components have been integrated into the department, workers are keeping children at home safely and avoiding the trauma of removal. Compton has seen a 52 percent reduction in out-of-home placements since FY 2002. This means the department is saving costs associated with placing children in foster care. At the same time, managers and workers believe they are addressing the disproportionate representation of African American children in the system in the Compton area.

The benefits of Up-Front Assessments include:

**More information**—and better information: The decision to remove a child, even when necessary, is one of the most difficult and painful decisions a caseworker has to make. In the past, workers and supervisors basically made this decision alone. The presence of any substance abuse at all, for example, usually meant removal. Now, with Up-Front Assessments, DCFS gets more in-depth information and an expert's opinion, which leads to a more informed decision about removal.

Paul Saur, a supervisor at the Emergency Response Command Post, is a champion. He said: "I like information. And I don't like to take kids if I don't have to. The more information I have and the more people tell me, the better. When parents conceal information, (problems) are more likely to happen again. If the information is on the table...we can get better services."

**Motivated families:** DCFS caseworkers are not present during the assessment. Parents are more comfortable talking to representatives of community-based organizations than to DCFS and are likely to offer more and more nuanced information to the assessor. As Kathy Icenhower, executive director of SHIELDS, said: "We become an ally with the family and advocate for them. They share things with us that they won't with the department because they're afraid the department will hold it against them." Since the assessment and services are voluntary, parents have a bigger stake in getting help. By keeping their children at home, they usually are more motivated to accept and follow through with service plans.

**Streamlined and targeted services:** The assessments help DCFS make sure they're not missing anything with a family and that families receive not only immediate services, but also appropriate services. Wendy Luke, a supervisor in the Compton office and a worker there when POE was first introduced, said: "Because we have an expert involved, we can identify the needs of the parents more specifically to keep children safe in the home. This might mean two services, as opposed to the 15 things that I might have suggested before."

When services are available quickly, more children can remain at home safely. Stephen Ambrose, senior vice president at CII, said: "Our ability to quickly link families to treatment and support often gives caseworkers the feeling of comfort they need in order to not remove the children."

**Better teamwork with the community and within DCFS:** Up-Front Assessments and the resulting services lead to better teamwork between DCFS and the community. Evangelina Reina, a supervisor in the Compton office and a long-time DCFS employee, believes this teamwork is a critical improvement. "There is no more working in a vacuum," she said. "The emergency response worker speaks to the intensive services worker and to the voluntary services worker and to the community organizations." Marts pointed out that the community is now a true partner with DCFS in Compton and that within the department, social workers relate better as members of a team. In Compton, "the janitor, the guard, everyone is part of the team and pitches in," he said.

**More trust from the community:** It takes a lot of work to transform the reputation of a child welfare agency in the community. Reina explained that POE was “where DCFS finally cracked the trust egg with families and the community.” Marts said, “Community organizations have been trying to partner with DCFS for a long time. They always had a stake in what was happening with kids in the community. They were like: ‘What took you so long?’ ” Now the community is at the table with DCFS. And in this economic climate, DCFS and the families that come to the agency’s attention need the help of community organizations more than ever.

**More families who seek help:** With the change in attitude toward DCFS, families now are stepping forward in places like Compton to proactively ask for help and services. They no longer are afraid that any and all contact with DCFS means removal of their children. Marts said: “Today, in the Compton community, people feel like social workers are out to help them. Even if we end up removing their kids, they believe we’re still trying to help them and get them the services they need.”

### Case Story: DCFS and SHIELDS Working Together

The six children of two young parents were removed by DCFS when the mother gave birth to her sixth child and she and the baby both tested positive for drugs. The mother participated in an assessment with SHIELDS that was a real eye-opener to her. “I really didn’t think I had a problem, but a lady asked me all these questions and it made me realize, ‘Oh my God, I do have a problem.’”

Both parents did an assessment with SHIELDS and received substance abuse services. In the mother’s case, the assessment also indicated depression, and she was treated for that as well. The parents participated in TDMs with their DCFS social worker, their SHIELDS counselors and family members. They set goals to improve their lives and reunify their family. They received family preservation services, counseling for the oldest children, and finally came together again as a family in a three-bedroom apartment in a SHIELDS-run complex.

When asked now what would have happened without the support from both DCFS and SHIELDS, the mother said: “I remember a period in my life when we were staying in one room with four kids. We were both totally involved with drugs. We couldn’t function as parents or as human beings.” The father had a good job before the couple’s involvement with drugs. They had cars and a nice place to live. But as the mother put it: “Everything all dried up.” At one point she tried to get help: “I remember going through the Yellow Pages and calling places for help. Everything cost \$300 or \$400 for every visit. And they recommended 10 visits. I was thinking, we’re going to die drug addicts.”

The couple realizes their family is stable now because of the collaboration between DCFS and SHIELDS. Without the assessment, they wouldn’t have gotten the right services so quickly or so cheaply. Without the services, they wouldn’t have been able to reunify their growing family.

The parents got their high school diplomas while in SHIELDS’ programs. She wants to be a counselor. He trained to work as a welder and in fiber optics and also wants to counsel others. “My family is great; my kids are great,” the young mother says now. “I want to give back so much of what’s been given to me.”

### Lessons Learned from Up-Front Assessments

The timing was right for a new way of doing business in Compton. Although the city had a high level of involvement with DCFS, the office that served Compton families had not been located in that community for years. In 2004, DCFS opened a new office there, and Eric Marts, regional administrator at the time, asked for volunteers

to pioneer the POE approach and to use Up-Front Assessments. Throughout training and implementation, he kept an open door policy and responded to any and all requests for meetings and brainstorming about cases.

Workers, managers, and assessors in Compton and the Command Post cited numerous lessons they learned about rolling out this innovative practice change:

- First, they had to debunk the myths. Some at DCFS, for example, felt POE meant they would lose their authority to make decisions about removal. Adriana Molina, a program director at CII, said of her conversations at the Command Post: “We had to explain that we knew they didn’t need our advice on placement. That was their expertise. We told them, ‘Our expertise is to look at the risk factors and provide the additional information that your social workers don’t have time to get.’ Once we started having that conversation, it opened up.” Eric Marts said: “POE doesn’t mean, ‘Don’t remove children.’ We’re saying see if you can mitigate the risk by bringing in resources and services in a timely manner. This is not about risk-taking. This is about reducing the risks. There’s a distinct difference.”
- Building champions among supervisors and line staff will make or break the practice. They have to try it and like it. CII’s Stephen Ambrose said: “Ultimately they must see the benefit. Research and data might be helpful, but for supervisors and caseworkers, it’s the individual case. So we need to tell the stories.”
- Some at DCFS worry that it takes too much time. Yes, the worker must explain the assessment to parents and get signed permission forms and wait for the assessor to arrive in order to introduce the clinician to the parent. But removal takes time, too, when a worker has to wait for the police or take a child for a medical appointment, even in the middle of the night. At the Command Post, staff estimate an up-front assessment takes an extra two or three hours. But they have less time-consuming paper work if the child is not removed, not to mention the other benefits of getting immediate services for the family and keeping the children at home safely.
- It takes community organizations with high-level, trained assessors and the resources to provide immediate services. Los Angeles is resource-rich in some communities, but poor in others.
- There is a serious need for a standardized Spanish version of the BSAP assessment tool. Although the assessors speak Spanish, results cannot be used in formal evaluations without a standardized Spanish version of the BSAP tool.
- Finally, some still worry that POE is too much work. It is more work than they did before, but it’s also smarter work. And, as social worker Wendy Luke said: “At the end of the day, I can leave and know that the decision I made was the right decision. I know now that if I take a child out of the home, that child needed to come out of the home. We’re taking the right kids, as opposed to just taking kids.”

## Impact of Up-Front Assessments

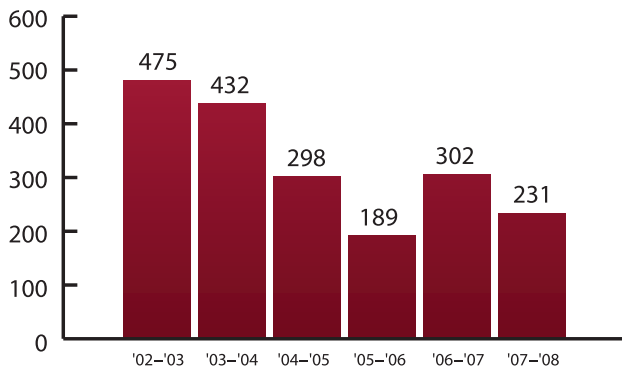
Proof of the effectiveness of any one child welfare intervention is almost always elusive. Reforms are linked and overlapping—by design—and each family is unique, even when facing similar problems. Nevertheless, Compton has a track record with Up-Front Assessments. Kathy Icenhower said SHIELDS has done approximately 2,700 assessments over the years and seen fewer than 50 removals. She believes that without the assessments and the resulting services these families received, most of these children would have been removed. She noted: “That’s about 5,000 children over the last four years who have stayed in their homes because of Up-Front Assessments.”

Compton still has one of the highest removal rates in the county—a reflection of the community and family

problems there. But their placement rate has decreased by 52 percent since FY 2002. Marts estimates that has resulted in a savings of almost \$5 million, given the cost of foster care per child: \$1,802 per month or \$21,624 annually. This trend cannot be solely attributed to POE or Up-Front Assessments, of course. It is part of a county-wide decrease in placement rates. But in Compton, they are convinced that assessments and services help keep children at home safely.

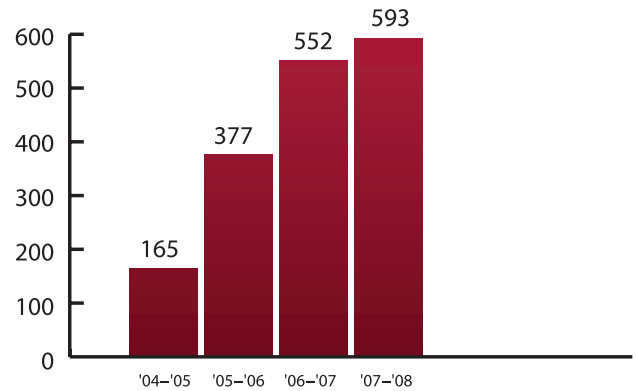
Up-Front Assessments take place at the beginning of a case, but the impact is felt throughout the case. Marts explained: “The assumption we made was that if we could fix the front end and make it more efficient and effective, then service delivery at the back end of the system would be more efficient, meaning that we would get more kids back home in a more timely manner: reunification. We would get more kids adopted. We would get more kids legal permanency through guardianship.”

Compton has a history here, too. In the year before introduction of POE, only 20 percent of children removed from their homes were reunified with their families within a year. In the first year after POE, 67 percent of children who had been removed went home within a year. “That’s because of the emphasis on reunification (and how you make the link from the front end to the back end,” Marts said. Families who get appropriate services get their children back more quickly.



**Children Removed in Compton, by year:**

52 percent reduction from 2002-03 to 2007-08



**Children Reunified in Compton by year:**

3.6 times as many children in 2007-08 as in 2004-05

In May 2008, the Metro North office began utilizing Up-Front Assessments, as did the Emergency Response Command Post, joining the Compton and nearby Wateridge offices in this new practice of supporting families and children. Between October 2007 and November 2008, some 800 assessments were completed.

# Specialized Youth Permanency Units



*We want to make permanency as intuitive as safety.*



—Bob Lewis, consultant, author, trainer

Like all child welfare agencies in this country, DCFS finds itself caring for a number of youth who have been in the system for years. Many of these are teenagers living in group homes or other residential placements. They have few if any connections to family. They are considered high-risk and often struggle with mental health and behavioral problems. Child welfare systems have traditionally seen these youth as unadoptable.

These are the youth who in the past aged out of the foster care system at age 18, with few if any supportive adults in their lives and little preparation to live on their own. Their future was bleak. In 2003, the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles estimated that of the 1,000 youth who aged out of the child welfare system each year, half dropped out of high school, one-third were on welfare, 25 percent became homeless, 25 percent became incarcerated, and more than half the girls became pregnant within four years.

## History of Youth Permanency Units

To DCFS, these are not acceptable outcomes, and leaders have been working to change them. In 2005, the Metro North office developed a pilot program, in conjunction with the California Permanency for Youth Project, aimed at finding permanency for youth in long-term foster care. Workers in a special unit set out to find family members and extended family members to provide the connections, sense of belonging and support that every young person needs to thrive. The flexible funding waiver was an incentive to build on and expand this pilot.

Metro North leaders were inspired by talking to the youth themselves. Regional Administrator Tedji Dessalegn noted: "In the past, these were the older kids that the department raised. We did not always have a good plan for them. We heard some of them tell us: 'You didn't take care of us.'"

The Metro North Permanency Unit began operating in October 2005 and realized almost immediately that the work could not be done with a normal-size caseload that, at the time, was above 30. Elvia Quirarte, a CSW in the unit, explained, "The hardest cases were referred to this unit, and it was very difficult when it started. The caseload wasn't low then, and it was a caseload of all high-needs youth."

When the flexible funding waiver was implemented in 2007, DCFS decided to use some of the flexible funds to continue the work at Metro North and add another unit in Pomona—and to lower the workers' caseloads. A third office, Santa Clarita, came on line in 2008. This work went hand in hand with the new permanency focus for TDMs across the county.

## The Practice: Goals and Expectations

The Youth Permanency Units focus on high-needs youth who meet several or all of the following criteria: no or limited family connections; a history of multiple recent placements; heavy involvement with substance abuse; recent psychiatric hospitalization; and a repeated history of running away. CSWs carry a caseload of only 15, which can expand to 24 to include siblings. In 2008, Metro North had a supervisor and five CSWs; Pomona, a supervisor and four CSWs.

## Goals for the Youth Permanency Units include:

- To find as many family and extended family connections as possible for each youth. (The family finding model they use suggests a goal of 45 connections for each youth.)
- To reduce the number of youth who age out through long-term foster care and to ensure that all youth who emancipate have at least one durable connection with a committed adult.
- To reduce the number of children in group home care by returning youth to parents when possible or to other permanent homes with relatives or non-relative extended family members.
- To transition youth to a lower level of care or to permanent meaningful adult connections.
- To explore reunification with birth parents, even if parental rights have been terminated (given the reality that youth often go home anyway when they emancipate from the system).
- To collaborate with group homes to ensure children receive reunification services when applicable.
- To involve youth as participants and leaders in their own permanency planning.

**Training:** Training goes on informally every day in the Youth Permanency Units as they integrate what is learned into everyday practice. Working with the California Permanency for Youth Project, DCFS has also brought in national experts to train and support the units. Trainings include: intensive family finding; how to connect with youth around family (and vice versa); and how to help youth deal with loss, grief and trauma. These units are also testing Families for Life, a new model of youth-led TDMs developed by Casey Family Services.

### Case Story: The Complexity of Permanence

The stories from the Metro North and Pomona Youth Permanency Units are notable for their complexity. Rarely is there a simple path to permanence, but rarely are there failures either. Metro North's Youth Permanency Unit supervisor Jerry Clyde talks about a teenager who was placed in care when he was 3 or 4 years old. The mother had disappeared. His father had denied paternity. Clyde explained: "He was living his life out in group homes. He was acting out and didn't have any real purpose in life or hope about where he was going to go or where his family was."

But the Youth Permanency Unit dug deep and found the mother, who was living in New York State. They put the two together, got wraparound services for them and eventually placed the youth with his mother. It was not a smooth road home, however. The mother had another child, a 3-year-old, and she and her teenage son were basically strangers to one another. He resented her, and services were not successfully addressing their needs. He began acting out at home and shoplifting. "One thing led to another and the mother said she just couldn't handle it," Clyde explained. "So they had to move him. Mother and son are still in contact, and the youth is now living in a guardianship situation."

This case was not a failure, but it yielded lessons for DCFS about the preparation needed for parents and the need to work with the family even after the child returns home. "We're still learning on this end how to prepare parents, how to help them understand that even though they're the biological parent, they still need to address their feelings and emotions to really accept the child back home," Clyde said. Robert Haley, the assistant regional administrator in Metro North, pointed out: "There are a lot of issues that go along with reconnecting to family. Finding family members is just the first step."

## Lessons Learned from Youth Permanency Units

Those who work in the Youth Permanency Units—CSWs, supervisors and their managers—were eager to share observations and lessons about this pioneering practice:

**Explaining the benefits to youth:** Many teens living in group homes don't think about permanency. They haven't had much of it in their lives and may not be quite sure what it means. The Youth Permanency Unit CSWs engage youth in a conversation from their point of view. They ask youth whom they want on their permanency team. David White, assistant regional administrator in Pomona explained: "We discovered you can't just have a permanency meeting with the kids without first asking them to think about it. You have to set it up so the kid is not embarrassed in front of a group of people. Ask them who is really important to them. If they were going to run away, where would they go? If they were sick, who would they want to take care of them? Once you do that, the youth tend to become very receptive because you're involving them. It's their choice. It's what they want."

**The necessity of low caseloads:** Low caseloads are critical to success of the model. Veronica Norwood, the supervisor of Pomona's Youth Permanency Unit said: "Low caseloads mean you have the time to go through the whole history of the case to find out what brought these kids into the system in the first place, and what kept them from getting adopted." Fonda Cormier, a worker in her unit, agreed: "A lot of these kids have major psychological problems, so we spend time presenting the case in TDMs and setting in wraparound services and dealing with issues at school and with running away and suicide threats and things like that." They could not devote that kind of attention to the youth if they carried a normal size caseload.

In Metro North, Elvia Quirarte said: "We're very close to our kids. We know that in all reality, we are the stable person in their life. We bring something to the table that other people can't, because we have a lower, more manageable caseload."

And then there's the paperwork, the bane of any caseworker's job, but a key piece of continuity. Metro North's Randolph Hardeman explained the difference a low caseload makes: "When caseloads are so high, the paper takes over. The permanency unit allows us the opportunity to put people ahead of the paper."

**Integration into the office:** The Pomona and Metro North offices have a "permanency first" attitude throughout the office that emphasizes youth involvement and entails office-wide training. Regional administrator Tedji Dessalegn at Metro North noted: "We almost all have the language now. We're all talking about it the same way."

An interesting challenge arises when CSWs from outside the Youth Permanency Units compare their caseloads of more than 30 with the lower caseloads of their peers. Questions of fairness can arise, at least until the other workers get a sense of the complexity of the permanency cases. In Pomona, ARA David White moved the Youth Permanency Unit to the same floor as the other CSWs on purpose. He knows that voices carry from cubicle to cubicle and believes that the more CSWs understand about the permanency cases, the better the casework in the whole office.

**Working with the courts:** The Youth Permanency Units search for and engage every family connection they can find, even parents whose rights were previously terminated. Some judges worry about re-establishing these contacts. Thus, working with the judiciary on permanency issues becomes an important task. In Pomona, CSW Fonda Cormier had a case with a failed adoption. She asked the judge for monitored visits with the mother whose rights had been terminated. The judge was not happy because this mom had been a drug user. But in the Youth Permanency Unit, "we are embracing these moms who have maybe had some issue that they just couldn't deal with, but their kids are still there. We're working with them," Cormier said. In this case, they held a TDM at the group home and both the daughter and the mother attended. The decision was to refer the youth for adoption

and to keep the family involved. Along the way, the youth's behavior stabilized, and she is preparing to move to a lower level of care.

Youth Permanency Unit workers are fearless on behalf of their clients. Pomona supervisor Veronica Norwood reported: "All of the workers in my unit are very passionate, not just about the job, but about the kids on their caseloads. They will stand up to the attorneys and the judges to say this child is capable of reaching goals. And they push their children as well." DCFS knows the courts must be their partners every step of the way when it comes to improving outcomes for children and families. Los Angeles County is fortunate to have judicial leaders on the bench who are supportive of change.

**Helping caregivers adjust:** Caregivers—parents, relatives, extended family—are rarely prepared for the emotional issues these youth bring to the table. Grief and abandonment run deep. Robert Haley, the ARA in the Metro North office explained: "These kids have had multiple losses. They've been removed from their parents, moving from one place to another. Each replacement is a loss." Because Youth Permanency Units are finding—and engaging—lost or far-flung relatives and caregivers who have not been in touch with the child for years, a key lesson for DCFS is to help the caregivers understand the impact of abandonment on a child's development. Grief and loss training for caseworkers helped address this problem in how they communicate with youth. DCFS also has learned the importance of teaching caregivers what it means if a youth is in the system for years, in and out of group homes. Fonda Cormier from Pomona said: "Caregivers sometimes look at the situation and say, 'Oh, these kids are bad.' But when we explain what these kids have lived through, they understand." Jerry Clyde, supervisor at Metro North, noted: "Returning home or transitioning into a new family is a much 'softer landing' for a child when these issues are attended to and can result in fewer replacements back into foster care and faster adaptation to family reunification."

**Supporting change in group homes:** Group homes are important placements for children who need short-term, targeted support and treatment. But too often, youth are there for years. In the past, both DCFS and group home leaders saw stability in a group home as a positive outcome. But this is not permanency in terms of true connections for a child.

The Youth Permanency Units give DCFS the opportunity to work more closely with group homes and to support a growing movement to help youth find permanency outside of an institution. Metro North's Robert Haley pointed out that some group homes are slower to change than others: "They were fearing the emotional reaction of the child, they were fearing placement disruption...but we learned to drill down and get past all the adults and focus on the youth and really look at their needs." Metro North continues to partner with group homes to build support for permanency, inviting group home managers to their permanency trainings and meetings.

The bottom line for DCFS is that no child should grow up in foster care or a group home. This philosophy serves DCFS well as they participate in a state-wide Residentially Based Services reform effort. The goal is to use group homes to provide specific therapeutic services for children, and to begin work with families immediately, even when their children are still in the group home.

**Language, cultural and immigration barriers:** Los Angeles County is one of the most diverse areas in the country, which brings numerous challenges to DCFS, particularly when it comes to finding and engaging family members. More than half of Los Angeles residents speak a language other than English at home, and 38 percent of households speak Spanish. DCFS has adequate Spanish-speaking staff in many, but not all, offices. It is particularly challenging, however, to find workers who are fluent in the language and culture of Cambodia or Thailand or Samoa, to mention just a few examples. In addition, a large population of immigrants—more than 36 percent of the population is foreign born—means family searches stretch far across borders. Metro North's Quirarte said:



“We have some roadblocks, especially if parents are out of the country. We’re trying to work something out with consulates to help develop a protocol to search for families who do not live in Los Angeles. Many of our parents are ‘whereabouts unknown’ in Mexico, for example, and there might be a lot of other family members there, too.”

### Case Story: “I refuse to allow you to fail.”

Being in a group home for years makes it difficult to transition into the real world. Twanette Crabb, a Youth Permanency Unit worker in Pomona, cites a case in which she placed a 16-year-old with a relative in Fresno, after he had spent many years in a group home. The placement was unraveling. He had stopped taking medication for a mental health problem, and he actually wanted to return to the group home. She said to him: “Let me be real with you. You’re 16. You’ve been in a group home since you were 6. You have become institutionalized.” She added: “I explained what institutionalized meant and told him the path he was taking could end up in jail. I said to him, ‘I’m not going to bring you back to Pasadena so you can hang out with your friends. It’s time to move on, to build that connection with your family.’ And he heard me. Later he called to thank me. I told him: ‘I refuse to allow you to fail.’” She was convinced that this youth, with so much potential in school and sports, could make it.

## Impact of Youth Permanency Units

A phrase often heard in the Youth Permanency Units is: “Work in progress.” It is too soon to declare definitive results on the long-term outcomes of the connections that have been made. ARA David White of Pomona said: “Evaluating outcomes for the cases in these units is difficult. If we wanted wonderful outcomes, we would take easier cases. But we are honestly and sincerely taking these cases that really need intensive work.”

Both Pomona and Metro North are tracking their progress. They are closing cases and setting goals for permanency. Numbers in this area do not stand still—entries and exits are ongoing. Metro North served 75 youth during the first year of the waiver. Fifty-three of these youth, who had been identified as having no or limited connections with family members, now have ongoing visits with siblings or other family members. Eleven youth returned home, four are under legal guardianship, 13 are living with relatives and 17 shifted to lower levels of care.

Pomona has one fewer CSW than Metro North, but during the waiver period, the unit served 72 youth. Six exited the system, two through adoption, one through legal guardianship and three through emancipation with lifelong connections. Sixteen moved to lower levels of care, including seven who were placed with relatives and one reunited with parents. Fifty-five youth who were previously identified as having no or limited connections with family members now have ongoing visits with siblings and other family members.

The Santa Clarita office, which is building its Youth Permanency Unit, currently serves 58 youth, six of whom have adoption plans, two have legal guardianship plans, one has already reunified with parents, five have moved to lower levels of care and five have achieved other permanent connections.

It is far too early to match the Youth Permanency Units’ work to outcomes for youth. But those who are championing this work are convinced it is the right direction to take. Both Pomona and Metro North saw significant declines in their group home population over the last year. Pomona saw a drop of 29 percent from 84 at the end of January 2008, to 60 at the end of February 2009. At Metro North, where the Youth Permanency Unit began earlier, the numbers dropped from 57 at the end of June 2007, to 21 at the end of January 2009, a decrease of 63 percent. This shift was not due solely to the Youth Permanency Units. But it was progress to be celebrated and shared with other regional offices where TDM facilitators are now being assigned to focus on permanency with a similar population of youth.

## What's Next for the Youth Permanency Units?

The Youth Permanency Unit team members are cheerleaders for this approach and eager for the program to be expanded. They know what it means to be able to offer these youth the family connections that have been so elusive in their young lives. They have witnessed the benefits on the faces and in the voices of their clients. As Cormier explained: “All our kids are damaged from being abandoned and separated from their families. You feel they're cheated out of life. They should have the same opportunity as our own kids for an education, to go to Disneyland, to be able to wear nice clothes...to just simply be happy.”

“I realize that to inculcate a change of this size is a massive endeavor, but this work truly does change our perspective,” said David White, of Pomona. “When I first started with this department, I was a social worker. We removed kids who were beat up. Then we became case managers for the courts. Youth permanency takes it to the next dimension. Now the biggest part of what we do is to make sure that kids stay connected and that they get the best services they can. That may or may not involve the courts. It definitely involves services, and it definitely involves making sure that kids keep connected with family, because family is how you grow up and survive in the long term.”

## Expansion of Team Decision-making



*We tried to do Team Decision-Making in a controlled burn, but it became so popular as people started to recognize the value, that it turned very quickly into a wildfire.*



—Michael Rauso, division chief, Multi-Agency Services

Southern Californians do not use wildfire analogies lightly, and when they do, it is rarely in a positive context. But a wildfire analogy came up frequently in DCFS interviews in reference to specific reforms that hold so much promise they bloom and multiply throughout the system. Chief among these fast-spreading changes is the practice of Team Decision-Making meetings (TDMs).

TDMs are multi-disciplinary team conferences in which family members, DCFS staff, close personal contacts, service providers and often community representatives come together to discuss and plan a child's future. It is critical to have participants who speak the language and understand the culture of the families in these meetings.

There are several models of family conferences. DCFS adopted the TDM version at the core of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family initiative, a neighborhood-based foster care system with a focus on family and permanence. Los Angeles County is one of 25 Family to Family counties in the state and the focus was a good match with the DCFS philosophy.

TDMs are now a core component of child welfare practice throughout Los Angeles County, required for every removal in order to ensure that each child in placement has a plan for reunification or other permanency as soon as possible. The idea is if families have a voice at the table during the case planning process, parents are more likely to contribute to and follow a service plan. When parents in the system began to thank social workers after their TDM, DCFS knew they were onto something important.

In 2008, DCFS staff held nearly 14,000 TDMs across the county, most of them for children who were entering the system. When the federal flexible waiver was approved, more TDMs were among the top improvements sought by community stakeholders and DCFS staff in the field.

## The Practice: TDMs for Permanency

The first-year waiver strategies called for expansion of TDMs across the county, with a new focus on permanency. DCFS hired 14 new TDM facilitators at the supervisory level and spread them across the county to work in all 18 regional offices. Their charge was to hold permanency TDMs, also known as Permanency Planning Conferences (PPCs), to review the barriers to permanency for youth living in group homes for two years or more with no or few known family connections. Michael Rauso explained: “We knew there were children doing well in group homes, and we felt they needed the opportunity to go back to their community. A TDM could help make that possible.”

DCFS no longer sees long-term stability in a group home as a positive indicator. They know the more time a child spends in a group home, the harder it is to transition out, or even step down to a less restrictive placement. In both Pomona and Metro North, staff is committed to a permanency TDM for every youth in a group home for three months or more.

Pomona permanency TDM facilitator, Ahiza Pinuelas, has worked in the system for 25 years in a variety of positions. “I like these TDMs because they sort of open up the workers’ eyes that you can’t just keep on cruising because Johnny’s not giving you any problems,” she said. “We want to be able to have these kids ready for when they leave the system. And in a group home, they’re not going to be able to develop a relationship, a permanent relationship.”

The permanency TDM itself is not so different from a traditional TDM. Frequently, there are fewer family members present because many of the youth are in permanent placements and parental rights have been terminated. But the core practice of the meeting is the same, with a team approach, a focus on strengths, brainstorming ideas, addressing concerns and developing a plan.

During the meeting, participants discuss the youth’s progress, length of time in placement and what is preventing transition to a lower level of care. When youth are ready to transition out or move to a lower level, a TDM is held to develop a transition plan.

Metro North permanency TDM facilitator Shawn Prokopec has more than 12 years of experience at DCFS, beginning as an emergency response worker. She covers both the Metro North and West Los Angeles offices and particularly likes the strength-based philosophy with these youth. “I find it’s really beneficial,” she said. “When you do the strengths, it really builds up the youth and shows the group home that these kids can function in a less restrictive environment.”

Prokopec finds three-quarters of her cases herself, searching the files for children in group homes and approaching their workers. The rest she gets when workers come to her. To build support among her colleagues, Prokopec does trainings and speaks at unit meetings, explaining why permanency TDMs are important. She believes this is the new direction for DCFS and makes sure to explain how TDMs fit into the department’s overall goals of safety, speedier paths to permanency and reduced reliance on out-of-home care.

### Case Story: The Value of Finding Family

A sister and brother, ages 12 and 11, were placed with a maternal grandmother when they were infants. She became their legal guardian and their cases were closed. In June 2007, both children were removed from her care when DCFS found out the children had not gone to school for five years and the grandmother had mental health problems. The children were placed in a foster home together, but the brother was removed

from that home because of his behavior. He was placed in a group home. A TDM was called for the brother, because he was under 12 and living in a group home.

Shawn Prokopec found the children's mother, who attended a TDM. They made plans for visitation. The mother also helped locate the maternal grandfather in Ohio who had remarried and has adult children. The two siblings visited him over the summer, excited about their first plane trip and meeting new relatives.

The initial goal was to reopen the mother's case for custody, but when that did not work, the goal was to move the children to Ohio. An assessment was done on the grandfather's home. However, due to the current economic situation and the fact that Ohio pays very little for relative care, the grandfather is unable to take the children. He will continue visitation for holidays and summer. In the meantime, the sister remains in a foster home with a family that is considering legal guardianship. The brother soon will move into an Intensive Treatment Foster Care home for a year, where he will receive intensive mental health treatment and tutoring. Visitation continues with the mother.

As this case illustrates, finding permanency is a complex and often rocky process. While these two youngsters did not find placement with their mother or grandfather as DCFS had hoped, they are in regular touch with both, as well as a whole group of relatives they did not even know they had.

## Lessons Learned from Permanency TDMs

Although TDMs are common practice in DCFS across the county now, the need for more remains, particularly with the difficult cases that the Youth Permanency Units and the permanency TDM facilitators take on. Many of the lessons learned from Permanency TDMs echo those found by the Youth Permanency Units in terms of educating staff within DCFS and group homes.

**Building support for permanency at DCFS:** The culture at DCFS has already shifted when it comes to using TDMs, but not necessarily when it comes to using TDMs for permanency. Some workers still believe youth who are stable in group homes should remain there. Prokopec believes group homes should be used “only for those kids who really need intensive treatment. And even then it should be limited.” At Metro North, they tell a TDM success story regularly in staff meetings. That way, Prokopec says, workers will understand that they can reunify families. Teenagers don't have to spend years in a group home. Multiple placements ending in institutions are no longer a default setting for DCFS.

DCFS is learning to be more creative in finding alternative placements for these youth. They look more closely at the people youth identify as important in their lives, whether or not they are family. DCFS is assessing group home staff, for example, for placement possibilities, or mentors who have supported the youth. Managers at Metro North meet with workers before they sign off on any group home placement. Prokopec said: “They want to make sure we've looked at all other options before agreeing to a group home placement.”

**Building support for permanency among group homes:** Youth involvement is critical to the success of a TDM, and both Prokopec and Pineulas know the power of focusing on youth strengths in front of their team. But some group homes are reluctant to allow youth to be present at their own meetings. They worry that youth may not be able to handle a two-hour meeting or cannot manage hearing others address their concerns and needs. The TDM facilitator does not have the power to demand the youth's presence, so, in these cases, a strong DCFS supervisor on the case is critical.

There is no one-size-fits-all group home, however, and many are changing. Some have been leaders in introducing wraparound services for children and families. Others have been at the forefront of advancing permanency for youth. Five Acres is a venerable service agency that has its origins in an orphanage founded in 1888. It evolved to include two group homes and a residential treatment center, as well as community-based programs, therapeutic family services and more. Five Acres began working with Metro North several years ago to achieve permanency for children in placement, including use of family finding and engagement. As the agency evolved, they added more outreach and work with families and even refocused their mission from helping children become caring and productive adults to helping families raise children to become caring and productive adults. Their current vision is one of “effective partnerships with empowered families.”

Robert Ketch, Executive Director of Five Acres, pointed out that they had to do a lot of education within their organization. They started by building the belief that permanency matters. Some of the youth at Five Acres are older teens. “They’ve had it with their parents,” Ketch said. “We must believe that they really do want a family and that the family connections are worth it and that some place, even in a messy family, there is a relationship that can really make a difference. And that even in a messy relationship, with some help, you can deal with a lot of issues that are leading a youth to be self-defeating or self-destructive.”

At first, working with families was a stretch for group home staff. Traditionally, helping families was secondary to supporting the children themselves. “In this field, we’re big-time rescuers, and rescuing kids has its emotional pull,” Ketch said. “But once we recognize that we’re not permanent in a child’s life, the rescue can be about families. When that transfer of rescue goes out to families, it gets to be really exciting.”

Five Acres now has a team of three people working full time on permanency issues: two therapists and a parent partner. The parent partner is a woman whose children were in the system, who got her life together and now can share her own experience and wisdom with hard-to-reach parents and relatives. Five Acres knows the story does not end when a child leaves the group home with their family. Five Acres now has an aftercare program, as well as wraparound services and continuing care. In addition, Five Acres is one of three agencies in Los Angeles County working with DCFS on a Residentially Based Reform initiative.

## Impact of Permanency TDMs

Data cannot isolate the specific impact of permanency TDMs—or of the Youth Permanency Units, for that matter. Too many factors influence the results, and data can be interpreted many ways. But the mantra that children should not have to grow up in group homes is now broadcast up and down the line at DCFS. Prokopec believes TDMs make this shift a practical possibility for youth and their families. “There are intensive services like wraparound that can assist them in a foster home or relative care,” she said. These services not only are better for the child, but are less costly. Group homes in Los Angeles can cost more than \$80,000 a year. Wraparound services, which entail extensive, in-home support for families, average a little more than \$50,000 a year.

By June 30, 2008, 222 youth in group home placements across the county had a permanency TDM. These meetings resulted in identified permanency plans for 120 children to move to the home of a parent or relative or to a reduced level of placement, including foster family agencies, licensed foster homes or specialized foster homes. Between July and December 2008, facilitators completed an additional 460 permanency conferences. These conferences resulted in recommended plans for 48 youth to return to the home of a parent and 159 youth to move to a reduced level of placement, including relative care.

Prokopec and Pinuelas and the 12 other permanency TDM facilitators have covered a lot of ground in a short time. They are optimistic about the future. Prokopec’s vision “is that my position is probably going to be null and

void within a couple of years, or it's going to focus on something different." By spring, she predicted, "we'll probably be down to those youth who really need to be in a group home." And even for those, she added, "we'll be making plans with the family and DCFS and the group home for six months or nine months or 12 months max." Prokopec concluded with a smile: "I'm working myself out of a job."

The real impact of both the permanency TDMs and the Youth Permanency Units is felt by the youth themselves. The stories of their young lives rarely have a fairy-tale ending. Many will not walk out of their group homes side-by-side with a parent. But they have family connections now. They regularly see relatives some did not even realize they had. They are more aware of their family histories and their own personal stories. Many are leaving group homes to live with relatives or in other more family-like settings. This is the practical progress DCFS has in mind.

### Case Story: Dealing with the Unexpected

TDMs almost always are complex and often full of surprises. Pinuelas cited the case of a 15-year-old boy who had been in placement since the sixth grade. The mother and grandparents came to the TDM, but they were expecting a "perfect pre-teen," which they did not get. Pinuelas said: "The mother and grandparents were so inappropriate at the initial permanency conference that staff had to take the youth out of the room." The mother's ex-partner, who was also at the meeting, was more realistic. Since the TDM, he has been participating in family therapy with the youth, who is now doing well. The goal is for the teen to move in with him. Had they not called this TDM, it is highly unlikely that the child would even have made contact with the mother's former partner.

## A Wider Scope of Reform

DCFS, like many child welfare agencies working to improve outcomes, has an umbrella of reform activities going on simultaneously with many partners. Key partners and initiatives include:

- **Casey Family Programs:** Casey Family Programs (CFP), the nation's largest operating foundation focused solely on foster care, is an integral partner in multiple reforms taking place in Los Angeles. Headquartered in Seattle, CFP's goal is to increase the safety and well-being of children by strengthening families and finding permanent families for children in foster care. CFP believes those goals can be achieved by safely reducing the foster care population by 50 percent by the year 2020 and reinvesting the savings that result in systems improvement. DCFS has joined Casey Family Programs in the pledge to reduce its foster care population by half by 2020.

The partnership between Casey Family Programs and DCFS is a close one. In Los Angeles, CFP provides technical assistance, evaluation and support for staff under the federal flexible funding waiver, as well as other resources. CFP is interested in what can be learned about leadership, practice change, and how public/private partnerships can lead to improved outcomes for children and families. Bonnie Armstrong, CFP's director of strategic consulting in Los Angeles County, told DCFS: "If Casey is going to meet our goals nationally, we need to support you in meeting your goals in Los Angeles. As you continue to improve outcomes for children and families, we can share what is working well here with other jurisdictions across the country."

- **Probation Department:** The Probation Department is a partner with DCFS in the federal waiver. Foster care funds support approximately 2,000 youth on probation in Los Angeles County, most of them in group

homes or other residential placements. Probation leaders share the goals of DCFS in reducing the length of stay and increasing intensive, individualized services for youth and their families. Probation's first-year waiver strategies included implementation of a strength-based case assessment and planning process and Functional Family Therapy (FFT), a family-focused aftercare program. In the first year of the waiver, the length of stay for youth receiving FFT services decreased by an average of six months. Put another way, Probation used 1,098 fewer group home bed days during the first year of the waiver. In the period July 2008 to December 2008, the number of probation youth in group home care decreased by 7.8 percent. This was accompanied by caseload reductions for supervisory deputy probation officers.

- **The Prevention Initiative:** The Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project is a \$5 million, one-year effort funded by DCFS. It is targeted to high-risk neighborhoods in each of the Service Planning Areas (SPAs) in the county and aimed at building community support networks to help families stay out of the system or leave quickly. The demonstration project, which goes through June 2009, embodies a three-part theory of change that suggests a reduction in child abuse and neglect will occur if:
  - **Families are less isolated and can access the support they need.**
  - **Families are economically stable and can support themselves.**
  - **Activities and resources are integrated in communities and accessible to families.**

The Prevention Initiative and waiver activities fit together as a potentially seamless system of support for families and children. POE includes services delivered to families by community providers. The permanency efforts put youth back in family settings with wraparound services from the community. The vision of the Prevention Initiative links DCFS, nonprofit agencies and other county departments to strong communities, which help build stable families. Stable families nurture safe and healthy children, who grow up to support strong communities.

- **Katie A. Settlement:** The Katie A. settlement of a class action lawsuit focused on the mental health needs of children in foster care or at risk of entering foster care. Under the settlement, DCFS was ordered to expand screenings and assessments for these youth and to make sure youth in the child welfare system get the mental health services to which they are entitled. Close collaboration with the Department of Mental Health is the most important ingredient.
- **Residentially Based Services Reform (RBS):** As is clear from this report, DCFS is taking a new approach to its work with group homes. The state also is taking a leadership role and in 2007, passed a bill authorizing four counties or groups of counties, including Los Angeles, to develop and test new models of residential care. The initiative is designed to transform group homes into a system of short-term stabilization and targeted treatment, preferably no more than nine months. Permanency will be a front and center concept. The child and family will receive wraparound services from the start, and child and family teams will coordinate community support in order to provide a seamless transfer back to the community. DCFS will work with three agencies in Los Angeles. There are no extra funds for this initiative; it is intended to be cost neutral, using funding already allocated for residential placements. The lessons learned will inform planning for statewide RBS reform to be considered by the legislature in 2011.
- **Linkages:** Especially in the current economy, there is a significant overlap of DCFS families and those served by CalWorks, the public assistance arm of the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS). State figures show that about 45 percent of children in Los Angeles County's child welfare system in 2002 had parents on public assistance at some point during the year. Linkages is an interdepartmental effort

between DCFS and DPSS focused on prevention and early intervention, making sure that families get both employment skills and parenting support. County-wide rollout is planned in 2009. Strategies include co-location of staff, TDMs, screening of DCFS families for DPSS programs and service coordination to ensure families on public assistance get both family preservation and family reunification services.

- **Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) and the Child Abuse Prevention, Intervention and Treatment Program (CAPIT):** These are federal and state funding streams that help prevent unnecessary placement of children outside the home through use of family support services, family preservation, time-limited family reunification, adoption promotion and child abuse prevention. DCFS is exploring the possibility of creating a more efficient and effective family-centered, strength-based, data-driven service delivery system by integrating these funding streams and services. For Los Angeles County, this represents approximately \$55 million a year.

DCFS leaders are well aware that they have multiple initiatives going on at any given time. They are mindful of the need to keep them moving in harmony and what it means for so many departments to work as partners in supporting children and families. DCFS Director Trish Ploehn said: “There is no way we are going to successfully serve all the children and families of this county unless every department and every community-based agency and our Board of Supervisors and our commissions understand that we all have the responsibility to work together to keep children safe. That means DCFS must be forthright and open and welcoming in bringing people to the table. It also requires us to go to other people’s tables and to share our resources and expect others to share theirs.”

## Evaluation

Evaluation in the field of child welfare is a complex undertaking. Success is not simple and is rarely absolute. Much of the data on the specific waiver strategies still depends on manual tracking. Nevertheless, the state, county, DCFS and Casey Family Programs are committed to learning from the reforms taking place and are sponsoring a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to assess progress:

- The terms of the waiver require a third-party evaluation, and the state contracted with Charles Ferguson of the School of Social Work at San Jose State University. He is doing process, fiscal and outcome studies, examining data for child welfare and probation in both Los Angeles and Alameda counties, and tracking key indicators over time to compare pre- and post-waiver results. He also is conducting key stakeholder interviews and expects to release an interim report in early 2010 and a final report in 2012 at the end of the five-year waiver project.
- The Prevention Initiative is the focus of a diverse group of evaluators who are conducting a place-based, strength-based and family-centered package of evaluations. Evaluation components include surveys, focus groups, interviews and case studies. The evaluators include staff from Casey Family Programs, University of Southern California, Claremont Graduate University, Stanford University, California State University-Long Beach, UCLA and First 5 LA, a nonprofit that funds programs for children up to 5 years old. In January 2009, a preliminary report on the Prevention Initiative’s first six months celebrated some early successes and gained laudatory comments from members of the Board of Supervisors. Upcoming reports will look at different aspects of the Prevention Initiative and how POE works together with prevention to divert families from entering the system.
- On a regular basis, DCFS and Probation sponsor a series of county-wide learning sessions, in which staff from both departments join with community partners and stakeholders to discuss the lessons they are learning from their work together. In 2009, these meetings also will include other county departments that



work with the same families as DCFS.

- Reports sponsored by Casey Family Programs, including this one, will chronicle the stories of the leaders, workers and families over time.

DCFS has hefty aspirations for practice change. Leaders are using data as a learning tool, not as a hammer. Because California has one of the best child welfare data systems in the country, DCFS leaders and managers can closely follow their own progress over time—down to the regional office level—to see what works and what needs to be improved. Director Ploehn reports that it is now common practice for regional managers to call one another to compare notes on data results and ask advice. This is the kind of learning—built on trust and a spirit of inquiry—that DCFS wants to model and to spread throughout the system.

## Cost Benefits of Practice Change

Practice change takes political will, leadership and good communication skills. It takes effective management, solid teamwork and ongoing collaboration with partners in other agencies and the community. It takes evaluation and attention to the lessons learned. But doing business differently does not necessarily cost a lot of extra money.

Funds are needed for training and for tools such as the BSAP assessment for POE. (SHIELDS estimates that each assessment cost \$350 in staff time; a one-time licensing fee covers use of the tool itself.) Funds also are required to support lower caseloads for caseworkers. Community organizations need resources to provide the services that will keep families safe and at home. Currently the organizations that support families following an upfront assessment are funded through a combination of DCFS, Department of Mental Health, the Department of Alcohol and Drug Abuse and private grants. Ongoing funding for these services is a growing concern in a rocky economy.

However, if you look at the cost of placement in Los Angeles, the savings from well-implemented strategies such as the ones described in this report can save—in fact, already have saved—millions. In the first year of the federal flexible funding waiver, DCFS generated \$28.9 million in re-investable funds. The first-year waiver strategies are an investment in the future.

Every time a Youth Permanency Unit worker closes a case and a child exits a group home, it is likely a case that would not have closed without the flexible funds made possible by the waiver. Every time an Up-Front Assessment leads to targeted services and avoids placement, it is likely a family that would have been separated in the past and will now remain together. Group homes in Los Angeles County can cost more than \$80,000 a year. Foster care costs more than \$21,000. When fewer children enter the system or the length of stay in foster care decreases, money is saved. When fewer children are placed in costly group homes or step down more quickly, money is saved. These are savings that can be reinvested to help other families and continue the downward trend of foster care placements in the county.

On the last day of January 2009, there were just 937 children in group homes throughout Los Angeles County, down 30 percent from 1,343 children on the last day of June 2007, just before the waiver went into effect. No single reform effort made the difference. Practice change comes from a new philosophy and a basket of new approaches that work together to influence outcomes. Practice change also leads to savings that can be redirected elsewhere to support children and families.

Better child welfare practice also yields another kind of cost savings. Anyone who has ever heard the sobs of a child separated from his or her mother or father knows there is an emotional cost to families and children who are split up. Icenhower from SHIELDS pointed out: “Children are the glue that hold people together. You remove the glue, and you remove all the hope they have. Sometimes parents will make it back to get help, but most of the

time you have just pulled the last thread from them, and it may take them forever to get it back again.” There is a huge emotional toll on youth who grow up in foster care.

Finally, there are the benefits to communities of doing business differently. Icenhower believes Compton already is experiencing some of those benefits. SHIELDS is seeing more intact families coming in for services. With POE integrated into their community, she thinks they are getting to families sooner and “not tearing them apart.” Icenhower said: “We now have a much more stable community.” Stable communities mean less crime, less violence, more economic opportunities and a better tax base—a renewable circle of support.

## **A Defining Moment: Difficult Choices, Difficult Times**

By January 2009, it was clear that Los Angeles, along with the rest of the country, was facing a serious economic downturn. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in the county rose to 10.5 percent in that month, and there were indications it could go higher. The state faced a \$42 billion budget deficit that could have major trickle down effects on the county’s budget and therefore on DCFS. State and local politicians were discussing “doomsday” solutions.

The good news was the \$28.9 million in re-investable funds that DCFS generated during the first year of the waiver. The difficult news was deciding how to reinvest it. The waiver itself stipulates that savings must be reinvested in child welfare services, a deterrent to the argument that DCFS share its savings with other county agencies during difficult times. DCFS could, however, put some of these savings aside. This “rainy day” scenario stemmed from worries that increasing unemployment and poverty could lead to more abuse and neglect and an upturn in foster care. Because the county gets a capped allocation under the waiver agreement, it will not receive additional funds if the number of children in placement rises.

DCFS leaders thought long and hard about this dilemma and asked the Children’s Research Center for a trend analysis to determine whether previous economic downturns in Los Angeles had corresponded with an increase in foster care placements. The results showed no clear correlation in the past between increased unemployment and increased numbers of children and youth in foster care. This was reassuring, although DCFS recognizes that the current economic downturn is uncharted territory.

Nevertheless, DCFS made a bold decision to invest in community resources now and keep the reform momentum moving forward. They asked the Board of Supervisors to approve a reinvestment plan that would not only expand the first-year strategies as implemented, but also invest in prevention activities to support families during challenging economic times in their own communities. The Board agreed. Specifically, the waiver funds will be used to:

- Extend the use of Up-Front Assessments across the county, adding additional community-based services to keep children at home safely.
- Support prevention activities, including a focus on those hotline calls that can be safely diverted to community organizations before problems escalate.
- Expand TDM conferences for families investigated at night and on weekends by the Emergency Response Command Post.
- Fully staff the Youth Permanency Units in Metro North, Pomona and Santa Clarita.
- Restore funds to four programs affected by federal cuts under the Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) program.

Yogi Berra once said: “Predictions can be tricky, especially when you’re talking about the future.” DCFS cannot predict the future, but they do want to influence it. Leaders are facing an economic forecast full of gloom and uncertainty. That’s exactly why the agency felt the urgency to act now to expand these innovative services that hold so much promise for families. DCFS believes holding back at this point runs a risk of returning to a child welfare system that depends on placement as its main response.

DCFS will continue to keep a close eye on entries and exits into the system, which they do in any case. Director Ploehn admitted that “no one has a crystal ball, but we believe that the work this county has done with the understanding that we were going to build community capacity and a safety net for children and families...is going to be the saving grace for our county’s children, despite our economic stress.”

## Challenges Ahead

With the recession still looming, DCFS, along with all departments in the county, is looking at cuts in its administrative budget. But there are other challenges to face as well. Some may seem mundane, but they nevertheless affect the day-to-day progress and practice of child welfare and particularly the expansion of reform. A few examples:

- **18 different offices, 18 different stories:** Los Angeles County is large and diverse, and the regional offices serve vastly differing demographics. One regional office alone has more children in care than some states. The offices also are at different points in terms of implementing reforms. Building support among the thousands of workers and supervisors who are in the field obviously does not happen overnight.
- **So many initiatives, so little time:** DCFS is blessed with progressive leadership and robust community organizations with which to partner. The regional offices of DCFS are introducing and juggling numerous initiatives, trainings and meetings, all the while continuing the day-to-day work of supporting families and keeping children safe. Many stakeholders are involved in these reforms, which helps build public will and sustain change. But precisely because there are so many stakeholders who have a voice, it can take longer to expand change.
- **Worker caseloads:** DCFS knows that if worker caseloads rise too high it could put a big dent in progress. In the past, if placement rates decreased, it was common practice to reassign workers, thus increasing the caseloads for those who remained. But DCFS is committed to lower caseloads across the board and to giving workers time to help those families who need it the most. The Youth Permanency Units have shown clearly the benefits of small caseloads. Now offices that decrease the number of children in care will be able to hold onto the resulting lower caseloads for all their caseworkers.
- **Re-entry rate:** The re-entry rate in Los Angeles is below the federal standard—a good sign—but when leaders cast their careful eyes on data in 2008 and saw a small increase in re-entries, it was a cause for concern. By examining the numbers and looking case-by-case as their data allows them to do, DCFS realized the increase was not so much due to re-abuse, but to problems around placement with new family members. Family finding is now so successful at DCFS that they sometimes place children with non-offending parents and relatives who are not always prepared to parent. Director Ploehn said: “There’s a lesson for us. Parenting is a tough job and we can’t just send the child to a non-offending parent and then say, ‘Good luck.’ We need to stay involved and make sure the parents have the support they need.”

## Conclusion: It's All About Practice Change



*People go through three stages of commitment to family-centered practice. The first is: 'Oh, we're already doing that.' As they learn more about what it really means, they get to the second stage: 'There's no way we could ever do that.' Then, finally, they get to the third stage: 'We can't not do that for our children and families.'*



—Sandy Lint, Iowa Department of Human Services

Practice change at DCFS is moving steadily across the county, one worker and one office at a time. It is still true, for the moment, that two families with similar problems may have two different experiences with DCFS, depending on where in the county they live. In both cases, the department looks at child safety issues. But the response, the services offered and the speed with which services are delivered can differ in different parts of the county.

Despite differences from office to office and worker to worker, DCFS is walking a path that leads straight to the third stage of family-centered practice. Some staff members already are there and leading the way among their peers. It is not unusual to hear a social worker like Wendy Luke say of the POE work in her Compton office: “I can’t imagine going back to an office where they did the old way of work. That would probably drive me crazy.”

DCFS does not want to drive staff like Wendy Luke crazy. That’s why they used their flexible funds to help build a package of practice changes. What matters is not that the reforms are in different stages of county-wide saturation in this second year of waiver implementation. What matters is that DCFS and the Board of Supervisors recognize that these practice changes illustrate a smarter way to do business and need to be replicated. What matters, too, is a new understanding of best practices, both within the child welfare agency and in the relationship between the agency and its community partners.

At DCFS, the vision and the plan for expansion are intact. Managers don’t always know how to get where they want to go, certainly in the midst of such challenging economic times. As ARA David White said about the path to youth-led permanency meetings in Pomona: “It’s kind of like a systematic approximation of getting to a goal. You can never go straight towards it, because many times the process of getting there is unknown, and you have to try something and then try something else and then try something else...It’s a constant state of fluid adjustment.”

DCFS has found renewed value in teamwork and in supporting its workers through the process of change. DCFS is beginning to see families as a resource—and families are eyeing DCFS differently as well. The reforms DCFS is putting in place are cost effective and yield savings for reinvestment. Managers are finding new confidence in using data to make decisions. Permanency is no longer an elusive goal.

Flexible spending reforms are in the national spotlight as well. A new administration in Washington D.C. is a good opportunity to look at more flexible federal funding to prevent abuse and neglect. In 2008, California’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care, a statewide panel focused on judicial reform, called for more flexibility in using federal foster care funds, as did the national Pew Commission on Foster Care a few years before. In addition, the eyes of other child welfare agencies are on DCFS, looking to the Los Angeles leadership to share its lessons about safely reducing the numbers of children in foster care.

DCFS Director Trish Ploehn still believes the flexibility of the waiver is one of the most important things the agency has going for it, along with the commitment and dedication of her staff. She said: “It is clear to us that if we did not have this waiver, we wouldn’t have had the flexibility to initiate some of these strategies, we wouldn’t be achieving the downward trend in the number of children in care. Without this waiver, there would be no money to put where our mouth is.”

At DCFS, there is a tangible level of excitement among a growing group of workers and managers about the practice changes they are putting in place. The image that comes to mind is an electrical grid, with tiny lights turning on, one at a time, all across the more than 4,000 square miles of this large and diverse county. If the trend continues, the grid will be ablaze, not in wildfires, but in lights.

### ***About the Author***

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