



LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Kimberly A. Foster
Executive Director

COMMISSIONERS:
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SANDRA RUDNICK
STACEY SAVELLE, VICE CHAIR
ADELINA SORKIN, LCSW/ACSW, CHAIR
DR. HARRIETTE F. WILLIAMS
TRULA J. WORTHY-CLAYTON, VICE CHAIR

APPROVED MINUTES

The Special Retreat Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **November 5, 2007**, in the Mojave Room of the California Endowment Center for Healthy Communities, 1000 North Alameda Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Carol O. Biondi
Susan F. Friedman
Helen A. Kleinberg
Sandra Rudnick
Stacey Savelle
Adelina Sorkin
Dr. Harriette F. Williams
Trula J. Worthy-Clayton

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Patricia Curry
Ann Franzen
Dr. La-Doris McClaney
Rev. Cecil L. Murray

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

The agenda of the November 5, 2007, special retreat meeting was unanimously approved.

CHAIR'S REPORT

- Chair Sorkin introduced Tina Pedersen, whose appointment to the Commission by the Fourth District will go before the Board of Supervisors for approval tomorrow. Ms. Pedersen is a licensed clinical social worker who consults at the Southern Los Angeles Regional Center; she hopes to focus on prevention and on children with special needs.

- A new requirement has been introduced for all county commissioners to undergo a four-hour cultural diversity and sexual harassment training every other year, and the Executive Office has solicited scheduling options. After some discussion, Commissioners agreed that a four-hour block from 9:00 to 1:00 p.m. be set aside for this training on a date the Commission normally meets, probably after the first of the year. Commissioners unable to attend on that day, or unable to stay for the full four hours, will need to attend the training held for another county commission. It is hoped that the Executive Office or the Chief Executive Office will compile a roster of training dates throughout the county.
- Chair Sorkin distributed a speaker request form used by the Mental Health Commission, to be used as a template for requesting Commission meeting agenda items, speakers, or discussion topics. Commissioners were asked to complete a similar form and return it to the office if they believe the Commission should consider an item.
- Also distributed was a child welfare services fact sheet prepared by the statistics section of DCFS from the LAKids intranet, which Commission office staff have now been trained to use. Commissioner Biondi asked that Commissioners also be granted access to both LAKids and ProbNet (the Probation Department's intranet) from their personal computers, to keep apprised of statistics, policies, and training opportunities.

In the five years since 2002, when the sample handout was prepared, the percentage of DCFS children under the age of four has grown from 23 to 27 percent, mostly in the two-and-under group. More children age 18 and older are in the system now, too, which Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton ascribed to a greater sensitivity to arranging services for older youth prior to their aging out of the system, and to keeping youth under court jurisdiction until they are ready to be on their own.

- Chair Sorkin thanked members of the retreat committee—Vice Chairs Franzen, Savelle, and Worthy-Clayton, as well as Commissioners Kleinberg and Williams—for all their hard work in putting together the day's activities.
- Chair Sorkin invited those in attendance to participate in an icebreaker exercise to get to know other Commissioners.

OPENING EXERCISE

Chair Sorkin read a poem written by a 16-year-old that was included in *My Voice, My Life, My Future—Mi Voz, Mi Vida, Mi Futuro*, a project assembled by Home At Last and the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles in conjunction with foster care awareness month activities in May 2006. The piece spoke movingly about the desire for reunification with family and the need for permanency and prevention in children's lives.

Chair Sorkin then quoted from the Commission's vision and function, a part of its policies and procedures adopted in 1996.

The Commission advises the Board in areas of child welfare and family policy. The Commission actively pursues all major issues affecting children, their families, and children's services in County government. The Commission's premise is that all children in our society are "at risk." In addition, as the County's resource for monitoring the efficacy of children's services, the Commission provides a forum to collect relevant information and thereafter present comprehensive and cohesive advice to the Board.

In formulating its recommendations to the Board, the Commission consults with County department heads, public officials of other jurisdictions, the community, providers, and others. The Commission independently review the policies, procedures, and systemic issues of various County departments serving children, monitors and evaluates all programs administered by County departments and agencies which provide children's services, assesses service levels, and identifies community needs. Thereafter, the Commission makes independent judgments which are reported directly to the Board and may give its recommendation to the involved County departments. By focusing on the performance of the County system, the Commission is able to advise the Board about deficiencies and make recommendations on improving overall policy and programs, thus enhancing accountability in the system. Thus, all involved agencies may be reviewed for their actions, priorities, and policies relative to the delivery of services to children and their families and where improvement is in order appropriate recommendations are made.

Clearly, the Commission is responsible for monitoring not only the Department of Children and Family Services, but all other county departments that serve children and families. Next year will be the Commission's 25th anniversary, and the list of activities it tracks seems to keep growing. Chair Sorkin invited participants to study the comments about teamwork and focus that were posted around the room, and then participate in an exercise to keep balloons in the air that represented relevant issues, organizations, and concepts—mental health, child fatality, First 5 LA, the Education Coordinating Council, faith-based, team decision-making, and so on. As the exercise demonstrated, keeping even a couple of dozen balloons aloft was impossible. Commissioners all have strong areas of expertise and passion, but setting priorities is a must.

BRAINSTORMING POSSIBLE 2007–2008 GOALS FOR THE COMMISSION

Much good work has been done, Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton said, but the Commission has not always been able to carry each of its initiatives to a conclusion that meets its obligation of reporting and making recommendations to the Board of Supervisors. This year, the Commission wants to concentrate on two or three issues, Vice Chair Savelle said, identifying clear goals, needed leadership, and how to measure success. No existing committees will be affected by these decisions; this retreat is simply to set priorities for the next year of the Commission's work. Vice Chair Savelle invited Commissioners to brainstorm areas of concern from which to select priorities.

- **Prevention**, including the two-pronged HST initiative—Healthier Communities, Stronger Families, Thriving Children—going before the Board of Supervisors this fall. The thrust led by the Chief Executive Office concentrates on four high-need

communities, while the DCFS effort uses a lead-agency model in each of the county's eight service planning areas (SPAs).

- **Departmental collaboration** with the community, with non-county organizations, and internally. For example, even though 40 percent of Probation children come from DCFS, the county's new cluster-type administrative structure silos juvenile probation away from children's services, presenting barriers to the cooperation that forms the basis of many initiatives.
- **Child neglect**, general and severe, which is the reason for 30 percent of all DCFS detainments. Promoting a broader community understanding of the effects of neglect on young children could be important.
- **Child fatalities**, with the Commission actively reviewing cases and identifying systemic failures. According to Chair Sorkin's understanding from the First Supervisorial District, an new independent review section for child fatalities has just been established in the Chief Executive Office.
- **Children birth to age five**, including First 5 LA (whose approved plans now stretch through 2014) and the universal preschool effort
- **The cultural and linguistic needs of children and families**, especially in areas with large monolingual Spanish-speaking populations, or undocumented families who do not obtain services for fear of immigration consequences
- The **Katie A.** lawsuit, brought to require better mental health services for children in the child welfare system, and the monitoring of its settlement implementation
- **Mentoring**
- **Psychotropic medication**
- **Relative caregivers**
- **Children with special needs**
- A **family focus** to working with children
- **Faith-based** efforts
- **Children's health**
- **Children's mental health**
- **Education**
- **Transition-age youth**
- **Mental Health Services Act**
- A **community-based approach** to the continuum of care

- **Employee training**
- **Program evaluation**
- The multiple **assessments** used by various departments
- **Youth representation** on the Commission
- **Homelessness**
- **Substance abuse**
- **Crisis management** within departments

DECIDING ON POSSIBLE 2007–2008 GOALS FOR THE COMMISSION

In voting for this year’s priorities from among that array, Commissioners were asked to consider their own capacity both for monitoring ongoing issues and for pursuing new fields. Though the Commission may wish to keep tabs on important efforts, other bodies are often set up to take the lead on given initiatives. Even if a topic receives few votes, that doesn’t mean the Commission will not address it.

Commissioners were asked to vote by placing colored dots on the flipchart sheets listing the brainstormed topics. The results were:

<u>4 Votes</u>	<u>3 Votes</u>	<u>2 Votes</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Child fatalities▪ Departmental collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Relative caregivers▪ Mentoring▪ Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Faith-based efforts▪ Children’s health▪ Family focus▪ Community-based approach▪ Youth representation

Some items in the original list can be folded under other topics—psychotropic medication under children’s health, for example—and some should be used as filters when overarching issues are examined for systemic issues. (Were deceased children neglected, homeless, or in need of substance abuse treatment? Can a mentor ensure that a child receives health services?)

Committee Structure

Of the top five topics, the Commission already has a dedicated committee for child fatalities, chaired by Commissioner Friedman, and for relative caregivers, chaired by Commissioner Williams. The prevention work group, though co-chaired by Commissioner Rudnick, is considered a DCFS-run working body, but that structure was deemed sufficient for the Commission’s purpose. (The faith-based committee remains active as well, and will continue its efforts of surveying DCFS and Probation staff, as well as working with the faith-based community.) Should the remaining two topics be elevated to committee status?

Departmental collaboration is being discussed and implemented by many groups in which Commissioners could become more involved as attendees, including:

- Champs ('champions' for children), top management of DCFS, Probation, and the Department of Mental Health
- The evaluation committee regarding residential care (DCFS and Probation)
- The Title IV-E waiver group (DCFS and Probation)
- Education initiatives in the probation camps

With regard to mentoring, the Board of Supervisors has mandated that every foster child have a mentor by 2010, but efforts in the county are disorganized. The Los Angeles Mentoring Partnership has been dissolved, and the Los Angeles Mentoring Model—led by the Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect (ICAN)—has ceased meeting during a DCFS process to identify lead agencies to administer \$250,000 in mentoring funds available for every two SPAs; contracts are expected in January or February.

In answer to questions about the legal status of the prevention work group, Commissioners clarified provisions of California's open-meeting law, the Brown Act, that according to County Counsel dictate certain realities. Commission committees may consist of no fewer than two Commissioners—three is preferred—who are the only voting members. Other individuals may be invited to attend and to provide information, but only Commissioners may set agendas and vote on action items. In addition, if a quorum of that committee attends another meeting together—in the community, at a DCFS office, or elsewhere—that meeting then becomes subject to the Brown Act and must be posted and open to the public. These rules apply not only to in-person gatherings but to conference calls and electronic communication as well.

Every Commissioner receives training on the Brown Act when they join, but a meeting with County Counsel managers was also suggested to discuss specific Commission issues and to seek help with possible different interpretations of the law, as well as advice and support for accomplishing the Commission's goals within the Brown Act framework.

Given these constraints, the structure of Commission committees becomes even more important, and Commissioners were urged to think about an arrangement that would function effectively.

Feedback Form

The retreat planning committee will e-mail everyone the information discussed here, asking for the following feedback:

- Should committees be formed for departmental collaboration and mentoring?
- Which committee(s) can Commissioners commit to working on?
- What goals should those committees have?
- What activities will further those goals?
- How can success be measured?
- Are these short-term (six-month) or long-term (year) goals?
- Should Commission meeting agendas include standing items for report-outs from these committees?

Responses may show that some subjects don't lend themselves to the committee structure, or that not enough people are willing to work on certain topics. Items can be tracked in various ways, with perhaps a point person reporting to the Commission at intervals.

During the lunch break, a short film on students and trauma, produced by the Los Angeles Unified School District's crisis counseling and intervention services division, was shown as a follow-up to the Commission's October 15 regular meeting. Following that, discussion continued on the five most-voted-for topics.

Child Fatalities

Recent child fatalities in Los Angeles County have overwhelmingly been a result of gang violence, but young children are also being killed during co-sleeping, when a parent under the influence of drugs or alcohol rolls over on the child. Some hospitals give beds to every baby born there, as they do with car seats, and the NAACP is working on one aspect of the cultural component. Substance abuse, though, tends to be the underlying problem. Particularly because of the tie to prevention, Commissioners considered a public relations and education campaign around safe sleeping that would be similar to the Safe Surrender initiative, or educating the public about shaken-baby syndrome.

Although all child deaths in the county are reported to DCFS, Commissioners are notified only of those cases that had previous contact with that department. Of the 43 or 44 deaths since January, Commissioner Biondi believes only 8 or 9 may involve systemic problems, and Commissioner Friedman has requested those files. In general, child fatality reports need to contain much more in-depth information.

In previous years, when Commissioners reviewed cases of deceased children, reports to DCFS identifying systemic concerns yielded the response that departmental policies existed on the given issue, yet little in practice changed. Commissioner Kleinberg would like the Commission to randomly review all cases, not just those of children involved in critical incidents. At present, the risk management division—under which the child fatality and critical incident section operates—is reporting to a new manager and is not yet functioning effectively. The first child fatality roundtable meeting was disorganized, and seemed less a forum for hard work on systemic issues than a show-and-tell for Commissioners. Communication about child fatalities and critical incidents is not widespread, and little corrective action is done except in terms of disciplining personnel.

The Office of Independent Review was overseeing child fatalities for DCFS at one point, but when its principal investigator was retained full-time by the Sheriff's Department, the position was never re-filled. The Inspector General's office, a previous attempt at oversight, has also been gone for years.

The Commission needs to take a comprehensive, independent approach to reviewing child deaths, discussing the history of the process with the department and understanding the reasons for its procedures. It also needs to be aware of processes within the ICAN death review board, which actually reads the autopsies of the children. A single case

review can take up to four hours, and Commissioners should factor in that time and commitment in their thinking about the issue.

Departmental Collaboration

In the past, the county's Chief Administrative Office—now the Chief Executive Office—had a “no wrong door” policy with regard to individuals seeking services within the complicated county system. In theory, the cluster arrangement of the new governance structure is meant to enable departmental collaboration, but silos are still likely within working relationships, and, in many cases, efforts that give the impression of being county-wide are still fragmented. Broadening the reach of the Commission to embrace not only DCFS but Probation and all other departments serving children and families will help true collaboration trickle down to the community level, where families are served.

Relative Caregivers

Commissioner Williams has headed the effort around relative care for the past seven or eight years, and the committee has issued three reports that recently went before the relative care roundtable for feedback. That material is now being summarized with an eye to bringing the Commission major recommendations to pass along to the Board.

Some recommendations have already been implemented, such as that requesting a relative care liaison in every SPA, which yielded the creation of DCFS's relative care division. The home-inspection provisions of the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act also gained a higher profile, and enhanced legislation around Kin-GAP (the Kinship Guardian Assistance Payments program) has allowed special-needs children additional clothing allowances and other services. Providing child care for relatives who participate in caregiver trainings is a piece to pursue in the future, along with ensuring that Kin-GAP youth receive independent living program services even without a social worker to refer them.

One issue new to Commissioner Williams is the ongoing referral of DCFS children to probate court for legal guardianship proceedings when their relatives are willing to care for them over the long term. Although families are being encouraged to do this through the DCFS hotline, going through probate court for a legal guardianship means that no services are thereafter available to these children. A legal guardianship obtained through the juvenile court guarantees services.

Vice Chair Savelle raised the issue of youth being placed with older siblings who may themselves have just aged out of the system. Social workers do not seem to require a high level of functioning in the custodial sibling, nor is extra support provided for those families. Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton would like to see the standards of suitable placement reviewed for *all* relatives, since both DCFS and Probation lean so heavily on relative placements and they may not in fact always be the best place for children.

Much good work has been done around relative care, but solid community outreach is still needed, and the group may want to continue expanding its work to look at probation youth and their families.

Mentoring

With the Board's mandate for foster and probation youth mentors, mentoring has gained focus in the county, especially in the last year and a half. A probation mentoring coordinator has been named, staff have been allocated to the DCFS mentoring unit, and DCFS is on the brink of contracting with lead agencies for a mentoring push at the community level. (DCFS's Lisa Parrish took on this responsibility, which is separate from ICAN's Los Angeles Mentoring Model piece—although ICAN Associates, the organization's fundraising arm, ultimately wants funds to come through ICAN rather than the department.) However, barriers and training issues still exist, Vice Chair Savelle said. At a workshop she attended in Pomona last week to train youth on what it means to have a mentor, none of the staff involved knew what to do when a youth requests one.

Vice Chair Savelle does not believe that the Commission needs a formal committee on this topic, but it definitely has a role in making sure that the idea gains traction, perhaps by tying it in to the faith-based committee as a formal subgroup. (Commissioner Biondi also suggested linking with the AmeriCorps mentoring program, although those young people are paid to be mentors and Vice Chair Savelle sees that as being in a different category.) Ms. Pedersen also suggested an emphasis on mentors for special-needs children, and will research what Regional Centers might have to offer with regard to equipping volunteers to serve that population.

Prevention

Commissioner Rudnick has co-chaired the prevention work group for the past four years, and its HST plan—Healthier Communities, Stronger Families, Thriving Children—is going to the Board of Supervisors this month; she urged Commissioners to voice their support of the initiative to Board offices. The prevention effort has been the poster child for collaboration in the county, she said, and if it works, it will fundamentally change the way that business is done. The initiative concentrates resources in a handful of at-risk communities to address the problems that cause child abuse: drug and alcohol abuse, gangs, general crime, and a lack of employment, education, housing, and health care. The county will partner with community-based organizations to upgrade the entire community, thus strengthening at-risk families.

Because the prevention initiative is so important, Commissioner Kleinberg feels that its implementation and evaluation should be a major focus for the Commission next year, and Commissioner Rudnick suggested regular progress reports.

Crisis Management

Although this was not spotlighted by the voting process, Commissioner Biondi suggested that Commissioners could perhaps make an appearance in times of crisis to express support for departments and to check that children are being properly cared for (another reason for access to the DCFS intranet, LAKids). During the recent wildfires, for instance, five probation camps were closed, and evacuated youth are still doubled up at different facilities. Children placed out of Los Angeles County were also affected.

'Point Person' Structure

When a formal committee structure does not exist, guidelines need to be established for the point people who will track individual areas of focus, in terms of reporting back to the larger body and feeding information into the stream of data being kept. Alternate representatives are also vital, since not every point person will be able to attend every relevant meeting. For the Mental Health Services Act planning for prevention and early intervention, for example, Commissioners Kleinberg and Williams are attending, but others are more than welcome, especially because prevention touches every aspect of the Commission's work. (MHSA meetings are already open to the public under the Brown Act.)

A list of meetings that Commissioners normally attend was requested, along with who attends and any standing meeting times. DCFS and Probation should also be asked to supply information about other meetings that the Commission would find relevant. Meeting attendance is generally coordinated through the Commission office, and staff were asked to complete the information loop by informing Commissioners when no one has RSVPd to attend a particular meeting, in case they can make an extra effort to go.

CONCLUSION

Vice Chairs Savelle and Worthy-Clayton asked everyone to stand ready to respond to the e-mail feedback form they will receive, which will determine the level of interest throughout the Commission in the topics discussed today. Commissioner Williams recapped the retreat activities and thanked everyone for their cooperation and participation. Chair Sorkin also expressed appreciation to participants for dedicating the day, and Commissioner Rudnick thanked the retreat organizers and especially Vice Chairs Savelle and Worthy-Clayton for facilitating the discussion.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Probation Department liaison Andrea Gordon raised additional issues about relative placements for youth involved with the delinquency court. If youth placed with relatives are arrested, spend time in juvenile hall, and are released, those relatives cannot receive payment for taking them back until the youth have spent six months with another relative or in a group home. This is Federal law, the department has been told, but it flies in the face of permanency efforts embraced by both Probation and DCFS. Those relatives are also prevented from visiting youth in juvenile hall, Commissioner Biondi said, even though Probation's restitution division will bill them for a portion of the cost of the youth's detention. In addition, Ms. Gordon continued, it's not unusual for relatives who care for mentally ill children with violent reactions to be charged early on with child abuse. Many cases exist in which relatives were charged many years ago, pled guilty, paid the fine, served their summary (informal) probation without incident, and DCFS has long since placed the child back with them. Because of their history, however, if their relative children are arrested years later and go to juvenile hall, they may never return to that home and have those relatives again paid for their care.

MEETING ADJOURNED