



LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Kimberly A. Foster
Executive Director

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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 General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **June 16, 2008**, in room 739 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple 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
Patricia Curry
Ann Franzen
Rev. Cecil L. Murray
Steven M. Olivas
Tina Pedersen
Martha Trevino Powell
Stacey Savelle
Adelina Sorkin
Trula J. Worthy-Clayton

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Susan F. Friedman
Dr. La-Doris McClaney
Helen A. Kleinberg
Sandra Rudnick
Dr. Harriette F. Williams

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

The agenda for the June 16, 2008, meeting was unanimously approved.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the June 2, 2008, meeting were unanimously approved.

CHAIR'S REPORT

- Chair Sorkin announced that the contract of consultant Evelyn Hughes, who has produced minutes of the Commission's meetings for the past five years, would not be renewed, in part because of budget considerations. Chair Sorkin commended Ms. Hughes's efforts in documenting meeting events so that outstanding matters are easily tracked for further action, and Commissioner Curry remembered Ms. Hughes as a helpful neighbor from her Children's Planning Council days in the 1990s. Chair Sorkin presented a card and gift to Ms. Hughes, who expressed her gratitude at having been able to serve the Commission and her belief in its important work.
- Commissioners discussed clarifications to a revised draft letter to the Board of Supervisors protesting the proposed cuts to the fiscal year 2008–2009 state budget. To expedite its sending, **Commissioner Powell moved that the letter be approved in concept and that Commissioner Curry and executive director Kim Foster be asked to incorporate the changes detailed in today's discussion. Commissioner Worthy-Clayton seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.**

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

In the absence of Department of Children and Family Services director Trish Ploehn, chief deputy Ted Myers updated Commissioners on a number of items.

- Mr. Myers thanked all the Commissioners who earlier this month attended Celebration '08, a high school graduation ceremony for foster and probation youth who have done well in school and whose goal is further education. The event was begun by United Friends of the Children some years ago, Commissioner Biondi said, and that organization continues to identify 20 students each year who receive scholarships and support that follows them through their first years in higher education. (UFC also sponsors a very effective tutoring program that starts in seventh grade.) Another ceremony—often more recreational in nature, according to Vice Chair Savelle—honors other graduates in the foster care system, and the Probation Department also holds a ceremony for its youth. Commissioner Pedersen urged DCFS to make sure that foster youth involved with Regional Centers, who may receive a certificate of high school completion even if they do not technically graduate, are also acknowledged.

Several Commissioners commented on the fact that school districts and principals should be linked into these special graduation ceremonies; many are excited to learn of these opportunities for foster and probation youth in their schools. Vice Chair Savelle suggested that inviting foster and probation youth just beginning high school to these celebrations would send a positive message about the value of education, although she realizes that the cost might be prohibitive. Independent living program budgets are being cut like everything else, Commissioner Curry said, and the Emancipation Partnership must juggle decisions about helping youth with rent, transportation, and job-search expenses, or paying for the Celebration.

- State budget cuts continue to be of concern, Mr. Myers said, and decisions at that level could put many successful departmental initiatives at risk. Tax increases are being resisted, but the connection between that resistance and the eventual paring down of core services does not seem to translate well to the public. The budget battle is expected to drag on through the summer months, with the department deep in contingency planning in case the state's proposed 11.4 percent cut to child welfare services is ultimately approved. The Title IV-E waiver provides little protection, as it applies only to Federal funding, not state dollars. In addition, possible decreases in Federal Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act funding—family support and family preservation—are being considered, with those cuts falling outside the waiver.

Commissioner Biondi suggested a presentation on Assembly Speaker Karen Bass's initiative, planned for 2010, to tax junk food and candy to bring in revenue for foster care. One stumbling block to that plan is a provision in the California state constitution that shields candy companies from ever being taxed. That can be overturned with a two-thirds majority vote, however, and Assembly Speaker Bass remains hopeful.

FAITH-BASED COMMITTEE REPORT

The Commission's faith-based committee was formed at the suggestion of Supervisor Don Knabe, who believes that faith-based organizations can provide important supplementary resources to social workers and other county staff charged with helping children and families. The Department of Mental Health works with faith-based communities, too, and Vice Chair Franzen also thanked Commissioner Powell for a connection to Sheriff Lee Baca's longstanding clergy committee. Providing venues for visitation, mentoring parents and youth, giving parents accurate child development information and counseling—these are all ways congregations can help support families in addition to traditional foster and adoptive home recruitment.

With the approval of the larger Commission, the faith-based committee this year surveyed DCFS offices on their interactions with faith communities, and Vice Chair Franzen thanked Ms. Ploehn for her help in promoting the department's 67 percent response rate. Anita Vigil has been instrumental in ensuring responses to a similar survey sent to Probation Department facilities. Most recently, a third survey—aimed at faith-based organizations themselves—was sent to over 200 houses of worship, but Vice Chair Franzen reported some difficulty in getting busy pastors and other faith leaders to respond. The committee is considering asking each of the county's eight service planning areas to recruit five houses of worship to participate in the survey, and Vice Chair Franzen promised an update on that process in a future report.

PROBATION ADOPTIONS

Lisa Campbell Mouton, director of the Probation Department's placement permanency and quality assurance section, explained that her unit was created as a result of AB 636, legislation that requires probation officers to perform the same child welfare functions as DCFS social workers for children placed in out-of-home care through the Probation Department. The quality assurance unit has expanded its focus into permanency planning,

reuniting youth to be reunited with their parents whenever possible, and identifying alternatives for permanent connections when reunification is not an option.

The number of children in suitable placement through Probation—including those living with their families and runaway youth—fluctuates between 1,100 and 1,500. Half those youngsters have some history with DCFS, though not necessarily an open case. (The percentage of DCFS involvement for incarcerated youth is likely higher, although Ms. Campbell Mouton said that statistic was not tracked.)

At present, 10 deputies in supervisor Art Mayfield's unit are working on 51 cases, including three adoptions and four legal guardianships. The youngsters are 90 percent boys, mostly 16 and 17 years old. So youth do not age out of the system without some lifelong adult connection, 18-year-olds are a primary focus. Group home staff, judges, and staff in the field help identify youth who have no family members in their lives, and refer those cases to the permanency unit for family-finding efforts. Probation officers talk to youth about relatives they may remember, work on a family tree, and call family members to engage them at whatever level they are comfortable, with the goal of finding someone to take on a permanent role in the child's life.

When adoptions through the Probation Department were originally proposed, no process for them existed within the delinquency court. A 20-member committee—including representatives from DCFS, Probation, the judiciary, the Alliance for Children's Rights, and County Counsel—helped develop that process, and the first adoption in the United States arranged by a probation department was recently finalized. Two legal guardianships have been finalized as well, with others pending. Word is spreading about the success of the effort, and Ms. Campbell Mouton asked Commissioners for their support in making it known. Judicial training is ongoing, and Judge Michael Nash (presiding judge of the juvenile court) has been asked to disseminate information to judges, clerks, attorneys and others. The permanency unit is also coordinating with the juvenile halls and probation camps to start permanency planning earlier, when it looks as if family reunification is not likely for a youngster who will be released from incarceration.

Probation adoptions will become part of the county's self-assessment plan as of July 1, and then will be incorporated into the system improvement plan that is created every three years. (This is the same process that ensured probation youth's access to Kin-GAP—the Kinship Guardian Assistance Payments program—once their legal guardianships have been finalized for 12 months.) System improvement plan funds will allow the department to purchase more family-finding search engines and to retain a family-finding expert for training opportunities.

The unit interacts constantly with the DCFS adoptions team. Every potential adoption is presented at a joint committee, joint trainings are scheduled, unit staff have visited DCFS's Permanency Partners Program (P3) to learn family-finding techniques, and the 'fost-adopt' concept is being explored. Confidentiality issues for media-based recruitment are somewhat more complicated for probation youth than for DCFS children, but the team would like to partner with the faith-based community and present potential adoptees

to congregations. The mindset about not mixing probation and DCFS children seems to be changing, and both systems seem to be realizing that “your kids are our kids,” as Ms. Campbell Mouton put it.

Commissioner Biondi asked about ‘reverse 241.1’ procedures, by which a judge returns jurisdiction of a delinquency case to the dependency court. Three reverse procedures have been done, Ms. Campbell Mouton said, but with her unit’s additional permanency planning protocols, youngsters often do just as well staying with probation and not being ordered back to dependency. DCFS resources are scarce, too, and even youth who haven’t committed crimes have trouble finding adoptive homes.

Commissioner Curry praised the hard work and passion on the part of the Commission and others over the past 12 or 15 years to raise awareness about the permanency needs of probation youth, particularly singling out Commissioner Biondi’s efforts. Commissioner Powell and Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton echoed that praise, as did Ms. Campbell Mouton. “Thank you for being that voice out there,” she told Commissioners. “Our kids need that, and they need your support.”

TEEN PREGNANCY

Marge Nichols, a long-time researcher now consulting with the Children’s Planning Council, reported that teen pregnancy has dropped every year since 1965 in both California and Los Angeles County, primarily as a result of birth control, for a total decrease of about 42 percent. In 2006, just under 14,000 births in the county—about 9 percent of all births—were to young women under the age of 20. Researchers expect a slight increase this year in both the state and county, driven by births to Hispanic teens, which, statewide, are 66 percent of all births and 71 percent of teen births. Of all births in Los Angeles County, 44 percent were to women who were born in the United States, while statewide that number is more like 53 percent.

Two-thirds of all teen births are to 18- and 19-year-olds. About 2 percent are to girls 14 and younger (about 250 births a year in Los Angeles County), 5 percent to 15-year-olds, 11 percent to 16-year-olds, and 19 percent to 17-year-olds. While older teenagers may be better able to cope with raising a child, those years are a time when they should be preparing for careers; raising a family at such an early age has an economic impact that can stretch far beyond an offspring’s infancy and childhood. Having a young child is very stressful, especially to someone who may be alone and in financially precarious circumstances, and the likelihood of either mother or child thriving is small. Whether the child’s father is present and involved is another issue; an overall lack of positive male role models is seen by some as leading to the dysfunction in much of today’s youth.

With teen births, only about 3 percent of the fathers are under the age of 20, and Ms. Nichols had no data on how many fathers are providing support. The only records available are those from the District Attorney’s office, for child support payments, but they don’t distinguish between fathers who were once part of the family and those who were not. (In Chair Sorkin’s experience with undocumented Spanish-speaking girls in the San

Gabriel Valley, fathers can be as much as 15 years older, and teens can easily be ensnared into abusive relationships.)

Parenting alone is particularly stressful for teens as they set the stage for the rest of their lives, but single parenthood in general is becoming more and more common—40 percent of *all* births in Los Angeles County, not just teen births, are to unmarried women. Unmarried parenthood is clearly a choice in most instances, although Ms. Nichols emphasized that it may be an uninformed choice.

Chair Sorkin asked whether any organization was tracking child fatalities to teen mothers, and Ms. Nichols said that the Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect (ICAN) child death report was the best source in the county, but she wasn't sure that it discussed the age of the parent. DCFS may track the ages of foster youth who are parenting, and Mr. Myers will find out.

Commissioner Curry raised the issue of girls in foster care having babies, a situation that was prevalent when the MacLaren Children's Center was still open. Many times, the young women had no one to help them make decisions about raising the child or releasing the baby for adoption, and matters were further complicated when a young parent ran away from care. How much training are social workers, foster parents, and group homes getting on this topic, so they can help these young women? A debate existed about 10 years ago in the child welfare field, Mr. Myers said, about how much "Planned Parenthood-type" counseling was appropriate for young people in the system. Since then, he believes some kind of comfort level has been reached for both DCFS and Probation, and whatever choice the youth makes is supported.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Leslie Heimov from the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles chaired the ICAN task force on pregnant and parenting teens for 14 years, and has been co-chairing a work group with DCFS on pregnant and parenting teens in foster care for the past three years. She encouraged Commissioners to invite both of those groups to make formal presentations before the Commission, and reported on several issues.

- DCFS has recently released a new policy on reproductive health services, developed in partnership with community agencies and advocates. Teens in foster care have the same rights as any other child in California, and are entitled to legally and medically accurate information on their reproductive options. Any time social workers become aware that a foster child is pregnant, they are required to offer the full range of family planning counseling, including termination, adoption, and parenting the child. Few social workers have been aware of this responsibility, however, and many think they are not allowed to offer this information. (It has always been permitted, Ms. Heimov said, but has only recently become a formal responsibility.) Putting the new DCFS policy into practice will be challenging, but it presents options in a comprehensive, detailed fashion, also addressing the relationship with the baby's father.

Commissioner Biondi asked whether social workers are charged with making sure foster youth are educated on reproductive matters *before* they become pregnant, and Ms. Heimov said that responsibility is not yet mandated, though the DCFS work group is considering a reproductive and sexual health curriculum, and 10 trainings for social workers have occurred. Ideally, caregivers should handle the topic, but some may not be able to impart—or be comfortable imparting—the accurate, relationship-based information that children need. (In the Los Angeles Unified School District, sex education is part of the fifth-grade curriculum, but it is a one- or two-day session that children may easily miss. Also, victims of abuse often have issues that should be handled by trained personnel.) The work group is looking at a decision tree for this responsibility, starting with the caregiver and flowing down to a public health nurse and then to a pediatrician or therapist, with the last option being the social worker. Peer counselors are also being considered, perhaps involving former foster youth who are currently DCFS employees.

- The family group decision-making model is being piloted for pregnant DCFS teens, inviting outside experts in family and pregnancy issues to conferences that are held as soon as the pregnancy becomes known. The hope is that the culture of pregnancy within the child welfare system can be changed, with teens becoming less likely to run away (fearing that their babies will be taken from them) and the department becoming more supportive of the new family should the teen choose to parent.
- As a result of SB 500, signed into law two years ago, whole-family foster care—getting moms and babies out of group care and placing them in homes with specially trained caregivers—is starting to be implemented, and foster parents are beginning the necessary classes. (Although the vast majority of teen parents in the system are young women, the policy addresses the rights of fathers as well.)
- Counting teen parents in DCFS cannot be done with the current CWS/CMS computer system, Ms. Heimov said, but she believes that between 300 and 500 young mothers are in the system. (Teen fathers, unfortunately, are not tracked at all.)
- Los Angeles County is one of only three sites in the U.S. that fund a nurse/family partnership, an evidence-based program in which a pregnant woman is paired with a specially trained nurse who begins home visits prior to the 26th week of pregnancy and continues them until the child is two years old. Advocates have been trying for several years to obtain funding for a dedicated nurse to carry a caseload of 20 foster youth, at a cost of about \$100,000. If the Commission could help promote this program, Ms. Heimov said, it would be much appreciated. Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton said that similar programs within the faith-based community have been successful, with mentors befriending teen mothers prior to the birth and maintaining those relationships, participating in a kind of ‘grandparent’ role.

MEETING ADJOURNED