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For the majority of foster children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect, the State has indicated a preference for case plans that attempt reunification with one or both parents before permanently terminating parental rights. Court-ordered visitation has been consistently linked to positive outcomes, and is the number one factor in effectively impacting family reunification. Such contact is essential to maintaining and strengthening parent-child relationships,¹ as well as alleviating attachment and adjustment disorders.² Visitation can also help parents improve and gain confidence in their parenting skills. In addition, frequent contact with parents has been found to improve children’s social and emotional health, and to decrease the length of time they spend in foster care and the number of placements they experience.³

For decades, enhancing visitation has been an objective of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Children and Families Commission, and Dependency Courts. It is specifically cited as a strategy for achieving the Title IV-E Waiver goals of permanency and reduced reliance on out-of-home care.

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¹ WJ Haight, JD Kagle & JE Black, “Understanding and Supporting Parent-Child Relationships during Foster Care Visit: Attachment Theory and Research,” *Social Work*, 48, (2003): 195-208.

² LM McWey & AK Mullis, “Improving the Lives of Children in Foster Care: The Impact of Supervised Visitation,” *Family Relations*, 53 (2004): 293-301

³ AL Cantos, LT Gries & V Slis, “Behavioral Correlates of Parental Visiting During Family Foster Care,” *Child Welfare*, 76 (1997): 309-330

Despite our best efforts, however, the median time to reunification in Los Angeles County is 10.2 months—nearly double the latest available national standard of 5.2 months.

Three aspects of family visitation in particular have presented challenges and opportunities: transportation and monitoring; family-friendly visitation facilities; and the quality of the parent-child interaction during the visit. As we begin to implement the State’s Continuum of Care Reform in 2017, there will be even greater need to recruit resource families as well as to improve family reunification. Addressing these issues is crucial to finding safe, temporary homes for our most vulnerable children and also to improving their permanency outcomes.

Transportation and Monitoring

Over the past decade, the number of foster homes in Los Angeles County has dramatically declined by more than half from 8,115 to 3,941. The need to transport a foster child for visitation with family is cited as the number one barrier for families considering taking a foster child,⁴ and lack of transportation is a commonly cited barrier to visitation.⁵ This is a particular challenge in our County where families from across the 4,000 square miles may lack access to reliable or efficient transportation. As the landscape of caregivers evolves to include more working families, many may not be able to transport and monitor visits which can occur 1-3 times a week, for 1-3 hours each.

Not only caregivers, but also Children’s Social Workers and Human Service Aides provide transportation and monitoring. While monitoring visits can be integral to social work, the frequency and duration can consume much of a worker’s demanding schedule. In some child welfare jurisdictions, there are specially designated transportation workers.⁶ Given the emerging industry of ride-sharing, companies may be able to transport birth parents to visits

⁴ DCFS focus groups of providers, stakeholders and relevant DCFS staff, January 6, 2015.

⁵ *Comprehensive Final Evaluation Report: Ohio’s Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project “ProtectOhio,”* Human Services Research Institute in collaboration with Westat, Chapin Hall Center for Children and Larry Wallerstein (2010): 140.

⁶ Wallerstein, 140.

closer to the child. Other companies specialize in driving unaccompanied minors, requiring drivers with caregiving experience to be vetted and live-scanned. Contracting out for such services may be a cost-effective way to address this barrier.

Visitation Centers

Visitation sites vary greatly depending on individual case circumstances. Visits may successfully take place in a home, while others in an office or restaurant which may be less conducive to parent-child interaction. Some DCFS offices partner with community- and faith-based organizations to host visitation sites; these sites may also improve parents' protective factors by strengthening community connections. In addition, models such as fully developed Family Visitation Centers (FVC), established by Friends of the Family in Service Planning Area (SPA) 2 and Grace Resource Center in SPA 1, are in warm, child-friendly settings where parents experience coached, supervised or therapeutic visits that can replicate typical family interactions. Today, there are over 33 visitation sites and centers Countywide, including many church-based locations.

The Quality of the Visit

Visitation provides a unique opportunity to support parents in improving their parenting skills with trained monitors. This strategy also helps alleviate monitoring demands on resource families and social workers. For example, in 2009, Friends of the Family developed a model visitation program as part of their FVCs, training coaches in SPA 1 and 2 and other areas to promote meaningful visits. They, along with Grace Resource Center, also provide case management staff to interface with DCFS, coaches, and families to coordinate visits, oversee reporting, and provide referrals and problem resolution. The FVC model has demonstrated positive results for the children, parents and resource families involved. In Glendora, the Building Forever Families initiative is another model that partners with Citrus College to train monitors, called Praise Parents, who conduct extended family enrichment gatherings to create

a clear pathway to permanency for foster care children of all ages.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Department of Children and Family Services to report back in 90 days with a comprehensive plan for best supporting children, resource families and parents in meeting family visitation requirements. Development of the report shall reflect input from the Association of Community Human Service Agencies, community- and faith-based visitation providers, Dependency Court, labor representatives, the Children and Families Commission, County Counsel and, if necessary, the Center for Strategic Public-Private Partnerships. The plan should:

- 1) Provide an analysis of the existing use of Human Services Aides and an assessment of possible efficiencies, as well as reorganization and/or additional staffing resources that may be needed for visitation transportation and monitoring; and explore the development of a pilot program to contract with ride-sharing services which might include trauma-informed training for drivers.
- 2) Explore the feasibility of expanding the number of family-friendly visitation sites and ways to ensure that resource families can access them.
- 3) Identify opportunities to improve parenting skills by expanding supportive visitation models. Such models may include training coaches in an approved curriculum to support parents during visits and providing comprehensive program coordination. In addition, DCFS, in consultation with visitation agencies, shall develop a one-page document for parents with suggestions on how to positively interact with their children during a visit, including age-appropriate topics and activities.
- 4) Ensure implementation of the Family Visitation Guidelines, developed with the Juvenile Dependency Court in 2005, with an update to comport with the newly established Core Practice Model.