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EQUITY FOR LA COUNTY FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

African American children are disproportionately overrepresented in foster care when compared with their representation in the general population. The representation of Latino children in foster care continues to grow due to the growing population of third generation Latino children. Research has also shown that lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are overrepresented in foster care. Children in foster care also experience disparities relating to health, education, homelessness, unemployment, and early and unplanned pregnancy, as well as incarceration at rates higher than their non-foster care peers. Given the health disparities experienced by LGBTQ youth, this can be a double burden for these youth in foster care.

All of these disparities are compounded by unresolved trauma, intergenerational poverty, language barriers, immigration, and other forms of oppression. In Los Angeles

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County, these challenges have been addressed through various initiatives over many years. For example, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) created the American Indian Child Welfare Unit to provide culturally-appropriate services to American Indian children and families under the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). DCFS also created the Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) Unit, which houses social workers who speak various languages and dialects, and understand the community they serve. Nevertheless, shifting child welfare practice toward prevention, intervention, and systemic reforms must become a centralized priority for DCFS. Working with the Health Agency's Center for Health Equity and the partner Departments of Public Health, Mental Health, Health Services, Probation, and Public Social Services is critical to this transition.

The National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the American Bar Association, among others, have separately reported on the various issues giving rise to disproportionality in foster care. These organizations have similarly noted that at every decision point within foster care, such as termination of family reunification or termination of parental rights, racial disproportionality is also apparent. To that end, jurisdictions across the United States have begun implementing strategies to reduce racial disproportionality and its concurring disparities impacting children in foster care.

For instance, in Tennessee, as a result of a class action lawsuit filed by Children's Rights, strategies to improve racial disparities in the state's child welfare system include engaging targeted recruitment efforts to increase African American foster homes, offering subsidized guardianship instead of terminating parental rights, maintaining a diverse workforce with cultural competency training, and a focus on analyzing performance data by race. Nevertheless, Children's Rights noted that Tennessee's child welfare must do more to

invest in community-based supports for families so that children are not needlessly taken from their homes in the first place.

In Franklin County, Ohio, in 2005, according to the American Bar Association, African American children represented 3,000 (47%) of Franklin County's agency caseload. According to the American Bar Association, through a five-step approach, that number dropped to 1,859 (41%) by 2010. Those steps included: (1) identification of the community's needs; (2) enhanced community resources and partnership; (3) engaging frontline practitioners when identifying problems and solutions; (4) the examination of racial bias in decision making; and (5) addressing racial bias within the agency. Though Franklin County's experience represents a small county's approach to addressing the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care, it also highlights the importance of working at both the community level and organizational levels to achieve positive change.

In Nassau County, New York, efforts are underway to implement a new strategy known as "blind removals." Blind removals require the case worker who has conducted an initial assessment of the family to present the case to a committee without mentioning demographics or neighborhood. All identifiable information on the case file is removed and the discussion focuses on what has occurred, relevant history, and family capacity and strength. The committee then makes a recommendation regarding whether the children should be removed from the family.

The Williams Institute at UCLA recently found that nearly 1 out of 5 (19.1%) foster youth in Los Angeles County identify as LGBTQ. The Williams Institute also reported that the percentage of youth in foster care who are LGBTQ is between 1.5 and 2 times that of youth living outside of foster care. More specifically, the research found that there are

13.4% LGBTQ-identified youth in foster care (compared to 7.2% in the general youth population), and 5.6% transgender youth in foster care (compared to 2.25% in the general youth population). Though LGBTQ youth are similarly overrepresented, the reasons for their overrepresentation and their needs may be both similar and different from African American children, youth, and families. For instance, data collection, safe and well-trained foster parents, overreliance on congregate care, mental health services, and permanency are issues that must be addressed with sensitivity to the unique needs of LGBTQ youth.

These limited examples suggest opportunities for Los Angeles County to explore. An Office of Equity within DCFS could serve as the unit for oversight and management of these efforts -- if equipped with proper support to demonstrate outcome-based change through its practices, within its workforce, and throughout the community. Its work could potentially target racial disproportionality and marginalization, the unique needs of LGBTQ youth and Native American families, the empowerment of women and girls, the engagement of fathers, support of relative caregivers, and service disparities across LA County zip codes. The Office of Equity should also identify opportunities to reduce implicit bias within the workforce, and actively engage stakeholders, experts in the field, and individuals with lived experience to inform and implement strategies to arrive at lasting change.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors direct the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to establish an Office of Equity, and in collaboration with the Departments of Public Health, Mental Health, Health Services, Probation, and Public Social Services, to report back to the Board of Supervisors in 90 days on:

1. An overview of the proposed infrastructure and function of the establishment of the Office of Equity, including:

- a. The identification of existing programs and resources that could be transferred to the Office of Equity;
 - b. The identification of a division manager and other resources necessary, including resources from departments within the County, to create the Office of Equity, and a projection of the funding required;
 - c. A plan that outlines the development of the office, and how it will work within the community and across the Department to bring about change;
 - d. Projections of where DCFS expects the office to be over the next year.
2. A preliminary review of data reflecting patterns of child protection involvement by race/ethnicity and LGBTQ status to inform the development of priorities for the Office of Equity, and best practices observed throughout the United States that could be adopted in Los Angeles County and recommendations for their possible adoption;
 3. The identification of an external consultant to provide expert guidance, and evaluation of improvement on an annual basis, and exploration of funding options; and
 4. A plan to engage stakeholders in the creation and function of the office—accounting for diverse interests, backgrounds, and from across the County.

WE, FURTHER MOVE, that following the creation of this office, a report containing data and evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of the Office of Equity is due to the Board of Supervisors every six months for a two-year period.

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