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**Enriching Lives through Expansion of the Upfront Family Finding Pilot**

With an average of 35,000 children under the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County (County) Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and approximately 18,000 children in care at any given time, DCFS has historically struggled with recruiting and retaining quality foster homes. One way that this challenge can be mitigated is with the identification and engagement of kin (or relative caregivers) who can support a child throughout the life of their case. It is widely recognized that it is in the best interest of children to maintain them in their home with proper supports when it is safe to do so. Federal law supports and requires this. When that is not possible, the next preference is for children to be released to kin in the following order: non-offending or non-custodial parents, relatives, and Non-Related Extended Family Members (NREFM). The next option would be placement in foster care if no kin are available. The final and least desirable option is congregate care, which is used with far less

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frequency nowadays, in the wake of continuum of care reform.

The engagement and ongoing support of kin as placement options can help to address many of DCFS's challenges when children come into care. Research indicates children placed with kin show greater rates of placement stability, reduced effects of trauma, better and increased permanency options, and better long-term health outcomes as opposed to those in foster placements. Further, the use of kin as placements and sources of support can help to address the familial and cultural needs of children in care in a meaningful way.

Nationwide, approximately 30% of children who come under the jurisdiction of child protective service agencies are placed with kin. In California, this rate is slightly higher, approximately 37.5%. In the County, this rate has hovered between 40-50% for several years. Though the rates of children placed with kin is better in the County than in other jurisdictions, DCFS remains committed to the early identification and engagement of relatives and NREFMs at the beginning of DCFS involvement.

On May 31, 2016, the Board of Supervisors approved a motion by Supervisors Kuehl and Solis directing DCFS and the Probation Department, in conjunction with the Courts, to establish an Upfront Family Finding (UFF) program, to be coordinated with DCFS's existing Permanency Partners Program (P3). Launched in 2004, P3 initially focused on placements for older foster youth and was expanded in 2011 to include upfront family finding for newly detained children. Retired and part-time DCFS Children's Social Workers (CSW) are assigned to the P3 program to make intensive efforts to locate any

and all non-custodial parents, relatives, and NREFMs of children who have been placed in out-of-home care. Once kin are located, the P3 program reaches out to them to discuss the various ways that they might be able to support a child in care, such as serving as placement resources and/or becoming involved in different ways (e.g. monitoring visits, providing respite care, or financial assistance, etc.). In response to the 2016 motion, a single countywide UFF protocol was developed, enabling DCFS to help support placement with kin as soon as children enter the child welfare system. The protocol was piloted in two DCFS regional offices (Glendora and Santa Fe Springs) in October 2016. The OCP secured the services of the nonprofit research organization Child Trends to evaluate the pilot, beginning in March 2017. By October 2017, the kinship placement rate for children served by these regional offices was found to have increased to a whopping 80 percent. These early successes led to an expansion to two more regional offices (Vermont Corridor and West Los Angeles) in January 2018.

The UFF protocol brings additional resources and support to help case carrying CSWs locate and engage with kin from the onset of DCFS contact. Discussions include how kin could be more involved earlier in the case planning process so that children can safely remain under the care of their parent(s). If this is not a possibility, they can also be considered for placement options so that children can live with people who already know and care about them. All of this has helped to improve DCFS practices and awareness of how crucial kinship placements are for a child's long-term well-being.

In its November 2018 evaluation of the UFF Protocol Pilot, Child Trends found that

an average of 17 relatives were found for children new to out-of-home care and that the pilot met its goal of increasing relative placements and engaging more relatives to provide support to children. The evaluation also noted that office culture shifted toward a more positive perception of relatives as resources for children removed from their homes.

Now operational in ten DCFS regional offices, the UFF Protocol has demonstrated an impressive 81 percent rate of placement with kin, from January through June of 2020. Child Trends is now engaged in a longitudinal study to evaluate the impact on placement stability, family reunification, permanency, and child well-being. However, children placed with non-offending parents are not part of the study, due to data limitations. Between 20 and 40 percent of children placed with kin through the UFF Protocol have been placed with non-offending parents, so it is important to ensure that outcomes for these children are also included in the study.

The results of the UFF Protocol clearly demonstrate that it works, and that it should be expanded to all nineteen regional DCFS offices, as well as given a second look by the Probation Department. DCFS and the OCP are in full support of this countywide expansion, which would align with the County's long-standing commitment to integrate a strength-based, family-focused, and trauma-informed practice to better serve families and communities.

**WE, THEREFORE, MOVE** that the Board of Supervisors instruct:

1. The Director of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), working with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the Director of the Office of Child Protection

(OCP), and the Director of the Center for Strategic Partnerships, to report back with a timeline and funding plan for expansion of the Upfront Family Finding (UFF) Protocol to the remaining nine DCFS offices that are not currently implementing the UFF Protocol;

2. The Director of DCFS to report back to the Board, in writing, on a quarterly basis on the progress of the expansion plan and, ultimately, the expansion itself, including identification of funding and staff;
3. The Director of DCFS to work with the Director of the OCP to report back on the feasibility of entering into a Memorandum of Agreement with Child Trends to ensure they can access deidentified data on children placed with their non-offending parent, in order to more comprehensively evaluate outcomes for children placed with kin; and
4. The Chief Probation Officer to report back to the Board, in writing, within 180 days on the feasibility of implementing a separate UFF Protocol or partnering with DCFS on the expansion of the UFF Protocol.

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