Los Angeles County
Commission for Children and Families

2008-2009
Annual Report

LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

COMMISSIONERS:
CAROL O. BIONDI
PATRICIA CURRY
ANN FRANZEN, VICE CHAIR
SUSAN F. FRIEDMAN
HELEN A. KLEINBERG
DR. LA-DORIS MCCLANEY
REV. CECIL L. MURRAY
STEVEN OLIVAS, ESQ.
TINA PEDERSEN, LCSW
SANDRA RUDNICK
ADELINA SORKIN, LCSW/ACSW CHAIR
MARTHA TREVINO POWELL
DR. HARRIETTE F. WILLIAMS

January 14, 2010

The Honorable Board of Supervisors
County of Los Angeles
Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration
500 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Honorable Supervisors:

COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES' 25TH ANNIVERSARY 2008-2009 ANNUAL REPORT

2009 has been a memorable year. This year we marked the 25th Anniversary of serving your Board and the children and families of Los Angeles County. Since its inception, the Commission has advocated for improved programs and services that result in positive outcomes for children and families.

During our history, we have had a host of remarkable people who have served on the Commission; some are not with us anymore. Each has contributed to improving the lives of children and their families. On April 30, we had the opportunity to honor five of the Commission Founders who have set the standard as to how our County can provide the services needed to improve outcome for children. These Founders include:

Nancy Daly
Helen Kleinberg
Elizabeth Lowe
Sandra Serrano Sewell
Stacey Winkler

During this celebration, your Board presented the Commission with a five-signature proclamation in honor of this special occasion. Patricia Ploehn, Department of Children and Family Services Director, also presented the Commission with a Stop Child Abuse framed poster.

500 West Temple Street, Hall of Administration, Room B-22, Los Angeles, CA 90012
Phone: 213/974-1558 Fax: 213/625-5813

The Commission in 1984 began the work to advise your Board on programs, needs, and issues that affect children and their families. This work continues to move forward with a group of Commissioners whose common vision for the children and families of Los Angeles County has made for insightful recommendations to your Board. Our work is also defined by the Commission members' passion, purpose and perseverance. The Commission could not have achieved this year's goals without its close working relationship with County department heads, the Juvenile Court, the Chief Executive Officer and the Deputy Chief Executive Officers, and our respective Board offices. We also count on the partnership established with the private and community agencies and other stakeholders. In addition, we are grateful to our Commission staff that has managed our collective as well as individual requests.

This Annual Report to your Board highlights the Commission's efforts in FY 2008-2009 to address the challenges to improve the quality of service delivery to the many at risk children, youth and families in our county.

The Commission appreciates the long-standing support you have provided and looks forward to continuing its work with your Board, County departments, Juvenile Court, stakeholders, consumers, advocates, and communities.

Respectfully submitted,

Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW

ADELINA SORKIN, LCSW/ACSW
Chairperson

Attachment

c: Chief Executive Officer
Executive Office, Board of Supervisors

Commissioners Serving from July 2008 – June 2009

Supervisor Gloria Molina
First Supervisorial District

Steven Olivas, Esq.
Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW
Martha Trevino Powell

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas
Second Supervisorial District

Dr. La-Doris McClaney
Rev. Cecil L. Murray
Harriette F. Williams, Ed.D.

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky
Third Supervisorial District

Carol O. Biondi
Susan Friedman
Helen A. Kleinberg

Supervisor Don Knabe
Fourth Supervisorial District

Ann Franzen
Tina Pedersen, LCSW
Sandra Rudnick

Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich
Fifth Supervisorial District

Patricia Curry
Stacey Savelle
Trula Worthy-Clayton

Commission Staff

Kimberly A. Foster, MSW
Executive Director

Cynthia Ocampo
Commission Secretary

Commission Officers

Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW, Chair
Patricia Curry, Vice Chair
Steven Olivas, Vice Chair
Tina Pedersen, Vice Chair

Commission Committees

Child Fatality Committee	Susan Friedman, Chair Carol Biondi Helen Kleinberg Stacey Savelle
Childhood Wellness Committee	Tina Pedersen, LCSW, Chair Ann Franzen Helen Kleinberg Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW Trula Worthy-Clayton
Faith-Based Committee	Ann Franzen, Chair Dr. La-Doris McClaney Rev. Cecil L. Murray Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW Martha Trevino Powell
Relative Care Committee	Harriette Williams, Ed.D., Chair Rev. Cecil L. Murray Stacey Savelle Trula Worthy-Clayton
TAY Oversight Committee	Patricia Curry, Chair Carol Biondi Stacey Savelle Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW

Ad-Hoc Committees

County Structure Committee	Patricia Curry, Chair Carol Biondi Helen Kleinberg Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW
25th Anniversary Committee	Martha Trevino Powell, Chair Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW Harriette Williams, Ed.D.

Commission Representatives on County Bodies

Agency Court Cooperation Committee	Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW
Countywide Gangs and Violence Reduction Strategy Committee/Pacoima Workgroup	Carol Biondi
Delinquency Representation Guidelines Committee	Carol Biondi
Disproportionality Workgroup	Stacey Savelle
Education Coordinating Council	Adelina Sorkin, LCSW/ACSW Martha Trevino Powell
Family Reunification Workgroup	Helen Kleinberg
First 5 LA	Harriette F. Williams, Ed.D.
Juvenile Court Psychotropic Medication Authorization Committee	Sandra Rudnick
Mental Health Services Act Stakeholders	Helen Kleinberg
Mental Health Services Act System Leadership Team	Patricia Curry
Policy Roundtable for Childcare	Ann Franzen
Prevention Workgroup	Sandra Rudnick
Visitation Resource Workgroup	Helen Kleinberg

Introduction

Twenty-five (25) years ago, on May 8, 1984, your Board approved the creation of the Commission for Children and Families (Commission). The Commission was given the responsibility to monitor and evaluate the recommendations made by the Children's Services Task Force.

The Commission was given the added responsibility in its Ordinance to:

- Review all programs administered by County departments that provide children's services for all children at risk,
- Receive input from appropriate community groups and individuals concerning County-administered children's services programs,
- Review and make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors concerning legislation dealing with children's services,
- Make recommendations, as necessary, to various department heads to improve children's services,
- Make recommendations, as necessary, to the Board of Supervisors on action to be taken to improve children's services,
- Provide an annual report to the Board of Supervisors concerning the status of children's services, along with recommendations for their improvement, to be utilized for broad community distribution and discussion.

While the Ordinance includes a wide scope, during this fiscal year, it was the Commission's goals to apprise the Board of Supervisors and the Chief Executive Office on issues pertaining to the safety, health and well-being of the County's at risk children and youth. Specifically, the Commission has devoted a significant portion of its time and efforts to the improved coordination and collaboration of County departments and the outcomes for children, youth and their families involved in the child welfare, juvenile justice, public health, health and mental health systems.

Throughout its history, the Commission has monitored the implementation and administration of a wide range of programs and services to children and families at risk. Our efforts have focused on the most relevant issues impacting the lives of children and families. Historically, our goals remain to ensure a continuum of care that is comprehensive, coordinated and well-integrated with County departments, clusters, care givers and the private sector.

Commission Preamble

In 2002, the Commission adopted the following preamble to guide its work on behalf of children and families:

> As members of the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families, we hold ourselves accountable to the Board of Supervisors and to the communities that they serve and from which we come. Although we are a diverse group of child advocates, we work collaboratively and are firmly united on our mission: enhancing the well being of children and families of Los Angeles County. The Commission believes that "the children can't wait," and we therefore summon a sense of urgency and dedication to our duties. This is a voluntary assignment, but we are greatly rewarded through the intrinsic and passionate nature of the ongoing effort to improve lives.

Current Environment

During the past 25 years, there have been changes in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. New strategies and programs have been developed to address the challenges to have services in place that begin with prevention and early intervention through placement and ending with permanency or prepared emancipation.

Data from Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) indicates that as of June 30, 2009, there were 32,128 children under the supervision of the Department. This represents a 7.7 percent decrease in children under our care during this reporting year. It also represents a 54 percent decrease in the last decade when the DCFS was supervising 70,000 children. In addition, there was a 10.1 percent decrease in the number of children in out-of-home care from 2008 to 2009. Relatives are providing care to 48.4 percent of the children in out-of-home care. Children under the age of four represent 29.1 percent of children under the supervision of DCFS, while 28.8 percent of the children are over the age of 14 year old. Minority children are over-represented in our county. African American children represent 29.9% of the caseload. Hispanic children represent 55.2% of the caseload.

The Commission has provided a voice in the development of DCFS' and the Probation Department's Systems Improvement Plan (SIP). As a result, more community stakeholders have been included in the process. In addition, concerns regarding re-entry are being addressed. The SIP has established goals to provide a better picture as to how the Departments are moving to more effectively improve the system for children and families.

Commission and CEO Collaborations

Since 1984, the Commission has recognized the importance of a public/private partnership to address the complex nature of developing successful programs for children and families that will promote their safety, health and well-being. The Commission has played a leadership role in this endeavor. In 1998, the Chief Administrative Officer, in a report to the Board of Supervisors, commended the Commission for the significant role it played in bringing about the Interagency Children's Services Consortium responsible for the coordination of services at MacLaren Children's Center.

In September 2008, the Commission met with Chief Executive Officer (CEO) William T Fujioka to establish a working relationship with the new CEO's structure. Subsequent to this meeting, the Deputy Chief Executive Officers (DCEOs) of the various clusters have attended three Commission meetings. During these meetings, the Commission identified the need for improved coordination and collaboration of services and programs across the County. The CEO and DCEOs agreed to work together in the five priorities identified by the Commission. The five priorities are Crossover Youth, Prevention, Relative Care, Transition Age Youth (TAY), and Wellness.

The Commission and CEO have established workgroups to address these priorities. The workgroups are co-convened by a member of the Commission and staff from the CEO. This new partnership will pursue common goals in the identified areas.

25 Years of Advocacy & Achievement

1984

Board of Supervisors establishes the Department of Children Services and the Commission for Children Services. The Commission was given responsibility to review all programs for children administered by County departments to improve delivery of services to abused and neglected children and their families.

The Commission establishes At-Risk MacLaren Children's Center Committee to improve services for children considered at risk (runaways and other status offenders); children in foster homes; and children residing at MacLaren Children's Center.

1991

Commissioners advocated in Washington DC for passage of federal legislation establishing Family Preservation Programs. Advocacy continues in Sacramento insuring implementation of Family Preservation.

1992

Commission advocated, supported, and participated in the design of a courthouse specifically for dependent children beginning in 1985. Edelman's Children's Center, a child-friendly facility, opened in 1992.

LOS ANGELES HERALD EXAMINER — Wednesday, April 11, 1984 — 25 cents

LYLE TACKLES CHILD ABUSE

L.A. Raiders end Lyle Alzado wipes away a tear during board hearing on children's protection agency.

Board approves protection agency

By Ruben Castaneda, Herald staff writer

Massive Los Angeles Raiders football player Lyle Alzado wiped away a tear as he recalled that abuse he suffered as a child was part of a successful emotional plea to the county Board of Supervisors yesterday to create a new county department to protect children.

"I am a resident of Manhattan Beach," the 6-foot-3, 260-pound Alzado said. "I have a 3-year-old boy, and I'm telling you, there is no way in hell I'm going to let anybody hurt him. Hear? I can't do it alone. I need you people. I need you now."

Alzado was one of several celebrities who attended the board's public hearing in behalf of creating the new department. Currently, child abuse services are performed by three county departments — Public Social Services, Adoptions and Probation — into a separate agency, Children's Services Department.

The action came after Alzado told the board that he came from

Department/A-7, Col. 4

1993

Commission advocates for educational needs of children in placement . In addition concern is express about the number of children moving from dependency to delinquency system.

Commission Co-Chaired Juvenile Court Emancipation Task Force addressing system and program improvement for youth aging out of delinquency and dependency systems. Commission continued to chair the committee for 12 years. Work resulted in several important changes: development of Early Start to Emancipation Planning program; changes to group home contracts requiring them to provide services to prepare youth for successful emancipation; development of emancipation took which became the basis for the State TILP; advocacy in Washington DC for deferral legislation to develop the Independent Living Program; ensure use of ILP dollars to be used for housing.

1997

Commission and community partners advocates for integration of County services at MacLaren Children's Center and the first Intranet Sharing of information by county departments.

1998

Group Home Task Force Report submitted to Board of Supervisors. This Report was instrumental in the passage of SB 933, landmark State legislation improving group home care for children. Included in the legislation was legislatively mandated monthly visits by social workers to all children in group homes.

Commission promotes adoption to achieve permanency.

Legal Permanency Task Force Report submitted to Board of Supervisors. Report addressed Kinship issues, Legal issues, Public Recruitment, Adoption Process.

Commission initiates the development of START Unit. This program receives County Productivity Award for collaboration of agencies because of its first ever multi-disciplinary approach.

Commission advocates for wrap around starting with the 10 Pilot Study.

1999

Commission assists in the creation of Children's Planning Council , Child Care Roundtable, First 5 Commission, and Educational Coordination Council.

Commission submits Progress for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care Program Development, 1994-1999, to the Board of Supervisors, summarizing accomplishments in terms of program development on behalf of adolescents aging out of foster care in Los Angeles County.

Commission and Probation Commission partner to advocate for LACOE and Probation to ensure a minimum of 300 minutes of academic instruction daily for all youth in probation camps.

Commission is member of Los Angeles County Foster Care: Children At Risk Report to Board of Supervisors. Report indicates that both the State of California and Los Angeles County have failed to develop and coordinate systems and procedures that monitor foster children's care.

2000

The Commission submits The Care and Safety of Children Currently Residing with Relative Caregivers addressing issues of commitment, assessment and placement, training, resources, court process, and data. This comprehensive study included focus groups and interviews with relative care families.

Commissioners and community partners successfully advocated for the creation of SIB to assist on integrating services of county Departments.

Commission advocated for a county Ombudsman for foster children in the Auditor Controllers Office

2001

Commission partners with Mental Health and Probation Commissions to develop Art Smart. This program for probation youth was recognized by the Productivity Commission as innovative and collaborative.

Commission participates in the Education Task Force that submits report to Board of Supervisors regarding quality of education available to at-risk children in Los Angles County.

Commission and DCFS jointly submit Relative Care Report to the Board of Supervisors.

Commission advocated for the passage of AB427 that provided funding to LA County for a Health and Educational Passport for foster and probation youth. AB 427 created THPP Plus Housing for youth transitioning from foster care.

2004

Commission is represented on MHSA Committees to ensure that children receive mental health funding and services. This work continues.

2005

Commission participates in the Judicial Protocol Visitation Committee establishing guidelines for visitation.

Commissioners and community leaders worked with the Directors of DCFS and Probation and advocated successfully for DCFS and Probation to opt into the waiver. Commissioners traveled to Sacramento and Washington DC advocating for IV E Waiver for Los Angeles.

2006

Following four years of advocacy, Board and Departments adopt Prevention Initiative.

Commission completes and analyzes faith-based surveys from DCFS and Probation Staff

2008

Amended Blanket Order granted to read DCFS and Probation child fatality cases.

Commission insists DCFS conduct re-entry study following family re-unification.

2009

Commission instrumental in increasing MHSA PEI funding to the most needy SPAs.

Commission presented findings on Childhood Obesity to Board of Supervisors resulting in Board Motion.

L-R: Supervisor Yaroslavsky, Past Chair Helen Kleinberg, Supervisor Antonovich and Past Supervisor Edelman.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

As indicated, the Commission has developed Committees to assist it in reviewing topical concerns and issues facing the County in the adequate provision of services to children and families and make recommendations to your Board.

Child Fatality Committee

In order to fulfill its duty to advise the Board of Supervisors on County programs for children, members of the Commission reviewed selected child fatality cases. A major focus this year had to do with the untimely deaths of children who at one time had been known by various County departments. The Commission's reviews are confidential and are primarily concerned with identifying systemic or policy issues in the cases that need to be addressed.

During this year, the Committee focused on crossover cases: cases in which a youth begins as a dependent and at some point moves to delinquency status. The Blanket Order issued February 20, 2008 by Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court, Michael Nash, authorized this review. Probation fatality cases have never been reviewed by this Commission.

We look forward to working with the Departments and CSIU, when the person is hired to work, towards implementation of these recommendations.

The following areas of concern, identified as part of this review, should be addressed by the appropriate offices and departments of the County, including, but not limited to, DCFS, the Department of Mental Health, the Probation Department, the Department of Health Services and the Chief Executive Office.

- Developing a red-flag warning system to initiate additional investigation after three calls to the Hotline with an "unfounded" or "unsubstantiated" notation in the record.
- Linking children and youth to mental health assessments, evaluations, and treatment services in a timely manner, and following up to ensure contact.
- Ensuring youth are prepared for aging-out, and, when applicable, are assisted with an SSI application.
- Implementing State legislation (AB 2352) that allows for the sharing of confidential mental health information with department of children and family services social workers and probation officers by mental health professionals.
- Ensuring that children and youth under the supervision and/or jurisdiction of the County are enrolled and attending school

Childhood Wellness Committee (formerly Children Obesity Committee)

This year, the Childhood Wellness Committee accomplished several goals designed to improve the service delivery system for children and youth in the county as it relates to wellness. Following extensive information gathering and collaboration with public and community partners, the Committee approached DCFS and the Board of Supervisors to address the issue of childhood obesity.

In August 2008, the Commission requested that DCFS develop a comprehensive policy and procedure to address childhood obesity. DCFS convened a Healthy Lifestyles Workgroup that is addressing the monitoring of Body Mass Index (BMI) of children, as well as standards that include healthy lifestyles changes with respect to nutrition and physical activity.

The Commission forwarded ten recommendations on childhood obesity to the Board of Supervisors on December 18, 2008. These recommendations are comprehensive in outlining strategies to address childhood obesity in county departments that interface with children.

A Board Motion made by Supervisor Don Knabe on April 14, 2009, was based on the Committee's report and recommendations. The motion directed the CEO to convene a Child Wellness Workgroup, comprised of the Departments of Public Health, Children and Family Services, Probation, Mental Health, and Parks and Recreation, and the Los

Angeles County Office of Education, the Commission for Children and Families, the Education Coordinating Council, First 5 LA, the Child Care Policy Roundtable, the Commission on Nutrition, the Children's Council of Los Angeles, the Association of Community Human Services Agencies, the Juvenile Court and the Public Defender.

This Childhood Wellness Policy, to be developed by this Workgroup, will include a mechanism for enhancing the provision of current nutrition and fitness information to parents, caregivers and County staff and ensuring that nutritional guidelines for children in out-of-home care and child care settings are followed. The policy will include a vehicle for public education and training as well as address issues involving the use of psychotropic medications, which can contribute to childhood obesity.

The Childhood Wellness Committee's goals for next year include issues such as dental, asthma, and vision services, teen pregnancy, parenting teens, and mental health collaboration.

Faith-Based Committee

The Faith-Based Committee's focus is exploring how faith-based organizations can provide support to the child welfare system and other departments involved with children and families. This year, the Committee analyzed surveys completed by administrative staff from DCFS and the Probation Department. The purpose of the surveys was to identify: the current level of engagement by the county with the Faith community; barriers that may occur in developing and maintaining a collaborative partnership; potential services available; and opportunities for strengthening relationships between County departments and the faith community.

The analysis indicated that presently the faith community is providing the following services: food banks, clothing, after school activities, recovery programs, and mentors. Although DCFS and Probation staff recognize the invaluable benefit of working collaboratively with the faith community, internal and external barriers were identified which hinder optimizing these resources. Some barriers indicated include: lack of dedicated staff to develop and maintain relationships; unresolved issues of separation between Church and State; successful completion of the requested background clearances; unclear expectations from the faith community regarding the needs of the departments; and the lack of trust from the faith community regarding the departments.

The Committee is pleased that Prevention Initiative Demonstration Projects include the use of faith-based facilities as visitation centers. The Committee was also successful in identifying specific resources (space and services) available from the faith community in Service Planning Area 7 and Service Planning Area 4.

The Committee also attended several significant events, including: The African American Pastors' Forum Second Annual Prayer Breakfast and Conference; Under One Sky-The 18th Annual Interfaith/ Intercultural Breakfast; and the DMH 2009 California Conference on Mental Health and Spirituality - The Journey to Wholeness.
The future goal of the Committee is to discuss the analysis and findings with DCFS and Probation, and monitor the progress in addressing the internal and external barriers identified in the surveys.

Relative Care Committee

The Commission remains committed to relative caregivers and the significant services they provide to children and youth in the child welfare and juvenile system. The Commission applauds the efforts of DCFS and Probation to achieve optimal outcomes; however, a significant gap and disparity remains in the level of services and support available to relative caregivers compared to state licensed foster parents, foster family agencies, and group homes.

The Relative Care Committee was created at the request of the Board of Supervisors. Its primary purpose is advocacy for relative caregivers who represent approximately 50% of all families receiving services from DCFS. Through the continued involvement of support groups, formal advocacy groups, and individual community stakeholders, the Committee remains committed to providing a mechanism for encouraging DCFS to respond appropriately to the various needs of relative caregivers.

This year, the focus of the Committee has been its collaboration with DCFS Kinship Programs and Support Centers and its ongoing advocacy for this population. In addition, the Committee initiated the process of gathering relevant caregiver data to more effectively assist in addressing systemic issues brought to the Committee's attention related to the Adoption and Safe Family Act (ASFA) assessment and reassessment process; the needs of older relative caregivers; and former foster youth who are caregivers for siblings. To that end, the Commission is represented on the Kinship Advocacy/Advisory Network (a public/private stakeholder workgroup).

Based on preliminary findings from the data and input from relative caregivers, we believe that the work of the support staff in collaboration with regional staff contributes to stabilizing potential placements and is essential to increasing permanency. Increased resources for childcare and respite care continue to be critical needs.

Transition Age Youth (TAY) Oversight Committee

The Commission created the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) TAY Oversight Committee to monitor the implementation of the TAY MHSA Plan. The Committee found that only four of the 18 TAY System Navigators had been hired, that none of the contracts for TAY Housing had been awarded, and that money allocated for full service partnership services for TAY exiting the probation camps had not been properly allocated for Probation. These issues were brought to the attention of the Department of Mental Health and were corrected. The oversight committee was pleased with the implementation and number of TAY being served by the full service partnership contracts. In addition, there were a number of TAY utilizing services in the emergency drop in centers.

The Commission had advocated that in the MHSA planning process the TAY be recognized as a fourth population and that funding be set aside accordingly. The Commission is pleased that in the first round of funding, TAY was set up as a fourth funding population as had been recommended. However, the Commission remains concerned that TAY was not recognized as a separate funding population as the planning process was completed.

COUNTY BODIES REPRESENTATION

In addition to the work by the Committees of the Commission, the Commission works closely with the Dependency Court, First 5 LA, and County departments in its role of advocacy for children and their families. The extent of these activities is highlighted in the Commission involvement in the following Workgroups and organizations.

Disproportionality Workgroup

Since last Fall, the Commission is represented on the Los Angeles Policy Workgroup on Disproportionality and Disparities in Child Welfare. Co-chaired by DCFS Director Trish Ploehn and Presiding Judge Michael Nash, and expertly facilitated by a team from Casey Family Programs, this group uses the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) Model to identify strategies and bring about change in the way interdisciplinary professionals provide services to diverse populations.

For decades, minority youth have been disproportionately represented in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The current Workgroup is designed to understand the scope of the problem, bring to light individual biases that may contribute to the manner in which youth and families are assessed and served, and suggest system improvements to assure equal treatment of all youth. The group's ongoing approach is data driven with the goal of recommending multidisciplinary and collaborative approaches to resolve the issue of disproportionality.

The Commission views the issue of disproportionality as critical in addressing the over-representation of minority children and youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Through our representation on this Workgroup, as well as our oversight role with County children's programs, we advocate for the necessary policy and practice changes to resolve this issue.

Family Reunification Workgroup

The DCFS Family Reunification Workgroup oversees the implementation of the June 2004 Family Reunification Report submitted to the Board of Supervisors. The goal of the Workgroup is to: track and improve the number of successful Family Reunifications, urge DCFS to intensify their efforts for improved family visitations, and to place serious emphasis on the role that alcohol and drug addiction plays on child welfare outcomes. The Commission continues to co-chair this workgroup.

The Commission is concerned that as the number and rate of families being reunited has increased (a goal of the federal government), the number of children re-entering the child welfare system following a family reunification has increased dramatically. It is for this reason that the Commission insisted that DCFS conduct a Re-Entry Study, which

was conducted in February 2009, to determine the factors contributing to the increase in failed reunifications. The Commission also suggested that DCFS include private service providers as part of a focus group.

The findings of the study indicated that re-entries primarily occurred within the first six months of reunification. In addition, problems were identified regarding the quality of transition planning, the lack of timely identification and access of resources once families were reunified, and the lack of inclusion of families in their case planning.

Currently, DCFS is conducting a Successful Family Reunification Study as a follow-up to the Re-Entry Study. Commissioners have played a role in the design and development of the study, and the efforts to improve the communications with parents, youth, caregivers and private agencies. The Commission is advocating that DCFS continue to commit the necessary financial resources and time needed to make the study significant.

The Commission views the ability of DCFS to collect and analyze data relative to reunification as critical. To that end, the ongoing job of the Commission will be to review the findings and ensure the implementation of recommendations from both studies into every day practice across the departments and with its partners. The Commission continues to have concerns with the apparent difficulty that DCFS has in viewing other stakeholders as important and equal partners. The Commission remains committed to this most vital area and will continue its participation on the Workgroup.

First 5 Los Angeles

The Commission has a long-standing commitment to the well-being of young children, ages 0-5. Following the passage of Proposition 10 in 1998, the Commission played a leadership role in establishing the First 5 LA Commission. The Commission is an ex-officio member of First 5 LA. Our mutual goal is to achieve better outcomes for children zero to five. This year, the Commission for Children and Families viewed its relationship as especially significant as First 5 worked diligently to develop its Strategic Plan for 2009-2014, and to set its priorities in the following areas: early learning, health, and safe children and families.

During the 2009 State Budget process, First 5's throughout the state were targeted by a ballot measure (Proposition 1D) that would have diverted most of their funding stream to the state general fund to balance the state's budget. The Commission advocated maintaining First 5 funding to meet local needs through a letter to the Board of Supervisors recommending that they oppose Proposition 1D. As the Commission, through its representative, works with First 5 to implement its strategic plan, we will explore additional opportunities for enhancing our relationship.

Juvenile Court Psychotropic Medication Authorization Committee

Throughout our history, the well-being of children and youth under the supervision of the Juvenile Court to whom psychotropic medication is administered has been an area of concern and focus for the Commission. The Commission is diligent in its efforts to oversee the new systems designed to appropriately monitor the prescribing, distribution and oversight of children taking these medications and advocated strongly for the changes in the protocol.

The Commission actively participates on the Juvenile Court Psychotropic Medication Committee. We are monitoring DCFS' implementation of the Juvenile Court Psychotropic Medication Protocol. The Commission remains vigilant in its work to ensure that the established policies, procedures and guidelines regarding psychotropic medication are followed.

Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) Stakeholders and System Leadership Team

The Commission supports the need for vital mental health services for children, youth and their families. In the past, insufficient funding and state and federal guidelines have created barriers to adequately address this need. MHSA provides an opportunity to access the mental health services previously not available to many of the children and families of the county. The Commission plays a critical role in advocating for the necessary and appropriate mental health services for children and families.

Two Commissioners have participated fully for the last four years in this process. They have been much-needed independent advocates for children and families. They have participated as voting members in the MHSA Stakeholder and System Leadership Team (SLT) process.

Through the efforts of the Commission representatives, the following was accomplished:

- Provided oversight of the implementation of monies in CSS for the TAY population.
- Urged DCFS to fully participate and to organize child/family resources in the Service Planning Areas (SPA) to better represent the foster care population.
- Worked to increase Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) funding dollars from 51 percent to 65 percent allocated for children and families.
- Provided leadership for allocating PEI funding dollars with an emphasis on extreme poverty and less on population thereby ensuring that SPAs known to have greater needs received a higher allocation. The final decision meant that some SPAs relinquished some dollars.

There is concern that too much time, money and effort has been placed on planning and the process. However, not enough time and effort is being spent on implementation and evaluation.

In order to ensure the level and quality of service required, and to achieve the best outcomes for the children, youth and families of the county, quality assurance and quality improvement measures must be put into place and monitored for compliance. This should include: an evaluation of MHSA funding utilization and the outcomes; public and private stakeholder oversight of implementation; training and professional development of program referral/criteria process for county personnel, public and private stakeholders; and improved collaboration between DCFS and DMH.

Prevention Workgroup

Since 2003, the Commission has partnered with DCFS in its Prevention Workgroup. The focus of this public and private stakeholder workgroup is the development of innovative and creative opportunities for reducing and eliminating risk factors associated with child abuse. It is hoped that by engaging isolated children and families and connecting them with community-based resources and agencies, children will be able to remain safely in their homes.

The Commission, through its representation on the Workgroup, provided support and advocacy that contributed to the successful accomplishment of the goals established by the Prevention Workgroup during this fiscal year. The specific goals identified were: the establishment of Prevention Initiative Demonstration Projects (PIDP) in five of the eight County SPAs, the securing of an additional year of funding for 2009-2010, and the engagement of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) for the purpose of forming teams.

Support for PIDP remains a priority for the Commission as we work with public and private stakeholders to reduce child abuse and neglect. The Commission is waiting for the results of the first year evaluation of the program. Our intent is to review the report and provide feedback to DCFS.

Visitation Workgroup

The DCFS Visitation Workgroup was established with the goal of ensuring the full implementation of the 2005 Juvenile Court approved Family Visitation Guidelines, through the identification of the requisite resources. The Workgroup's work has been particularly influenced by national findings that indicate that quality visitation enhances the possibility for successful family reunification.

Since the Workgroup's inception, the Commission, through its representation, has been successful in its efforts to ensure that visitation remains one of DCFS' highest priorities. During this reporting period, through its participation on the committee, the Commission has remained actively involved in some of the major DCFS endeavors such as: the Visitation Learning Organizational Group (LOG); the establishment of a quality assurance Visitation Checklist for utilization by Regional Administrators and Assistant Regional Administrators; the development and distribution of a new Policy Statement on Visitation; and the completion of training by July 2009 to all offices emphasizing the purpose of quality visits between children and parents. In addition, the Commission advocated for the type of quality visitations that would enhance reunification.

While the Commission applauds the work of the Juvenile Court, DCFS and the various public and private stakeholders responsible for the development of the Visitation Guidelines, we are concerned about 1) the lack of full implementation and its potential for delaying timely and successful reunification; 2) the continuation of the "siloed" approach to visitation (i.e. one Bureau having primary responsibility for visitation); 3) too much emphasis on compliance with documentation; 4) no purposeful visitations; 5) no coaching/mentoring opportunities for parents during visitation; the need for a cultural shift by staff during visits (from one of monitoring, to one of support); and 6) the lack of relevant staff training continuing to present barriers to quality visitation.

Other Commission External Involvement

The Commission also participates in other External Bodies. These includes: Agency Court Cooperation Committee, Children's Court Parking Fee Committee, Children's Planning Council, Countywide Gangs and Violence Reduction Strategy Committee/ Pacoima Workgroup, Delinquency Representation Guidelines Committee, Educational Coordinating Council, Healthy Lifestyles Workgroup, and Policy Child Care Roundtable.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

In its capacity to advise the Board of Supervisors on issues related to child welfare, the Commission made the following recommendations during this reporting period:

The Board of Supervisors should:

1. Support the implementation of an inter-agency information automation system by sending a five-signature letter to the state and federal Health and Human Services Agencies urging their support to remove obstacles that prevent the development of this system.

2. Conduct an independent evaluation of the interim county organizational structure and consider making changes needed to ensure that the structure is moving toward a seamless delivery of services for children and family in the county.

3. Provide a seamless integrated service system for children and families among collaborative county departments, and between the county departments and community stakeholders.

4. Develop an integrated and comprehensive approach to address the issue of childhood obesity.

5. Develop a plan to overcome the obstacles of working across county clusters and Departments to improve services for children and families.

6. Continue to support the Waiver for DCFS and Probation as it is has proven to be fiscally sound and allows for necessary flexibility in providing services for children, youth and their families.

7. Instruct the Children's Special Investigation Unit, when formed, to investigate DCFS and Probation fatality cases.

CONCLUSION

The Commission has been an advisor to the Board of Supervisors, served as a critical friend to those providing services to the children and youth of the County, and has been a forum for the private sector and advocates who seek solutions to improve the services delivery system and outcomes for the most vulnerable children of the County. In addition, the Commission was instrumental in supporting the establishment of the Children's Planning Council, First 5 Los Angeles, Education Coordinating Council, and Child Care Policy Roundtable. The Commission's hallmark is the ability to work effectively in collaboration with the various County departments and community stakeholders to make timely recommendations to the Board and State Legislators. Experts, advocates, caregivers and other are regularly invited to Commission meetings to make presentations and further educate the Commissioners on vital areas of concern.

It is for these reasons that the Commission strongly urges the implementation of the above recommendations to ensure that the safety, health and overall well-being of the Children of Los Angeles County are sufficiently met. It is the view of the Commission that the adoption and implementation of the above recommendations will not only improve outcomes for the children and youth who are at the greatest risk, but will result in a cultural change in the County service delivery system.

Special Appreciation:

Raema Avalos- Cover and Centerfold
Lorena Soto-25th Anniversary Photographs
United Friends of the Children-Newspaper clipping