

Family Preservation Services in Los Angeles:

A Report for the Department of Children and Family Services

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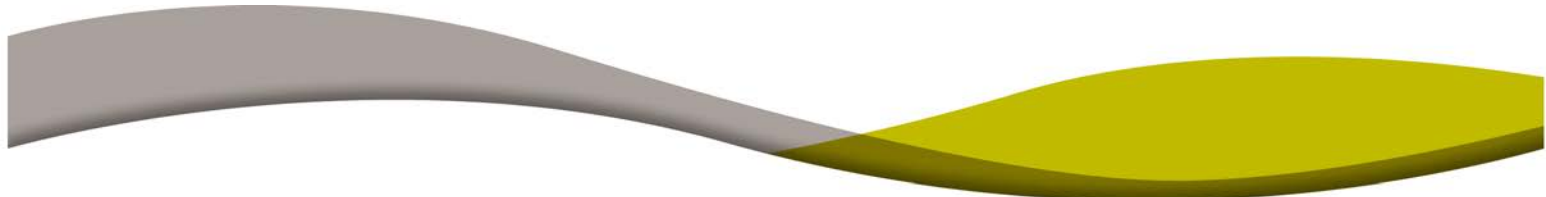


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Executive Summary

PURPOSE OF THIS EVALUATION STUDY

The Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is refining the contracting approach for Family Preservation Services (FPS) in the County, based in part on the lessons learned thus far about delivering FPS in Los Angeles and elsewhere, as well as the innovations and outcomes of the Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project.

LA's overall Family Preservation Program includes four components: (1) DCFS Family Preservation; (2) Probation Family Preservation; (3) Alternative Response Services (ARS); and (4) Up Front Assessment (UFA). While this report focuses primarily on DCFS Family Preservation services, it also includes some information on the impact of ARS and UFA, and includes expenditure data on all four of the program components. For the DCFS Family Preservation program component, services are offered to families in the Family Maintenance and Family Reunification programs.

This study looks at outcomes for both groups, with results further broken down into voluntary and court-ordered (involuntary) services. DCFS requested a report that focuses on the characteristics of the families served, agencies, services, costs, and outcomes for five Fiscal Years, beginning July 1, 2005 and ending June 30, 2010, including how FPS agencies are meeting the performance benchmarks set in their contracts. The report also includes data about DCFS worker and supervisor satisfaction with the contracted FPS, along with a special focus on the most recent fiscal year of 2009-10.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This evaluation study relied on the following methods for gathering data:

1. Child Welfare Services/Child Management System (CWS/CMS) data,
2. SDM® risk level data (final SDM risk level after overrides – the final assigned risk level)
3. Family Preservation Services and cost data from the billing data base,
4. Special survey of DCFS workers and Regional Office Administrators about the contracted Family Preservation Services that was made possible by the research team in the DCFS Bureau of Information Services.



SAMPLE SIZE FOR THE CHILD AND FAMILY-LEVEL ANALYSES

A total of 41 contract agencies (with 40 still active by 2009-10, the last year of the study period) with 64 delivery sites were involved in the study.¹ The focus was on FPS cases with a service start date between July 1, 2005 and June 30, 2010, and which also had an open DCFS case at the start of FPS services. This resulted in a final sample of 34,640 children. The family-level analyses focused on one child in the family. For families with more than one case during this time frame, a single focus case was selected to represent each family that was the first child served in FPS (duplicate families were identified using the Case Client ID variable). These selection criteria resulted in a final sample of 14,586 *unique families*. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Family Preservation Services Program Types and Number Served

	N for Family-Level (Focus Child) Analyses	N for Child-Level (All Children) Analyses
Family Maintenance	12,428	29,668
Voluntary (VFM)	6,563	15,628
Court-ordered (FM)	5,865	14,040
Family Reunification	2,158	4,972
Voluntary (VFR)	245	537
Court-ordered (FR)	1,913	4435
TOTAL	14,586	34,640

Family Risk of Child Maltreatment Levels. A large percentage of families (77.8% to 90.2%) had high or very high risk ratings on the SDM scale but the proportion varied across agencies. Note this is the final SDM risk level after overrides (the final assigned risk level).

WHAT KINDS OF SERVICES ARE BEING PROVIDED AND AT WHAT COST?

The total cost of all four Family Preservation program components (FPS, Alternative Response Services, Up-Front Assessments, and Probation) over this time period was almost \$161 million, with DCFS FP accounting for \$122 million or 76% of total expenditures. Annual expenditures for the DCFS FP services are summarized in Table 2.

¹ Although 41 agencies provided FPS during the study timeframe, some served only those families referred by staff in one regional office, while others provided services for families served by two or three regional offices; likewise, regional offices with larger caseloads might be served by more than one FPS agency. Thus the 64 “sites” refer to the combination of agencies providing FPS and the individual DCFS regional offices they served. When different FP contract agencies, sites and funding streams are factored in, there were a total of 77 FPS contracts considered in this study.



Table 2. Family Preservation Services Budget Expenditures by Year^a

Year and FPS Budget Amount		Year and FPS Budget Amount	
2005-06	\$23,077,419	2006-07	\$27,044,164
2007-08	\$24,124,670	2008-09	\$23,150,317
2009-10	\$24,957,278	TOTAL \$122,353,848	

^aNote that FPS figures in this table do not include, UFA, ARS and Probation costs.

Services data were limited but the three special services that were provided most often, in addition to the base rate FPS support were: Counseling (\$5,774,600), Teaching/Demonstrating Homemaking (\$2,529,290), and Transportation (\$2,561,215).

FPS

CPS Re-referrals for Family Maintenance. In comparing Voluntary and Court-ordered Family Maintenance outcomes, CPS re-referrals of the focus child during FPS did not differ much by group, but were high at about 1 in 5 youth. But the *substantiated* child maltreatment report rates during family maintenance services were much lower than the unfounded referral rates for both groups at 8.1% for VFM and 6.3% for FM (during FPS) and 8.3% for VFM and 7.9% for FM (after FPS).

Child Placements for Family Maintenance. The child removal rates during FPS for the Voluntary (10.0%) and Involuntary (8.6%) Family Maintenance cases were fairly low and in line with other studies of FPS. The child removal rates *after termination* of Family Maintenance services for the Voluntary (6.0%) and Involuntary (6.9%) services were fairly low and in line with other studies of FPS that are cited in the main report.

CPS Re-referrals for Family Reunification. For Court-Ordered Family Reunification outcomes, child maltreatment re-referrals of the focus child during FPS did not differ much between the two groups but were high at about 1 in 5 youth. But the substantiated child maltreatment report rates for Court-ordered Reunification services were 5.8% during Reunification services and 7.9% after.

Child Reunifications for Family Reunification. The reunifications achieved were substantial: 66.0% of FR focus group children were reunified during the official FR service period, and 45.7% were reunified after the FR services were terminated. Using benchmarking data from other states and counties, these appear to be positive levels of reunification. These percentages do not reflect the number of unique children though it does reflect the identified focal child in the family. Some children had multiple entries for different cases because they were served first in one FPS subcomponent and then later served in another. This is why the percentages add up to more than 100%.



What Variables Predict FPS Success?

Multivariate analyses to explore the relationship between FPS outcomes and demographic variables among families in FPS were conducted. There were variables that predicted FPS outcomes, such as higher SDM risk levels of child maltreatment, younger parent age, parent ethnicity, parent age, months receiving FPS (e.g., *Court-Ordered Family Maintenance*: Hispanics and larger household sizes less likely to have a re-referral, larger household sizes less likely to have a non-substantiated and substantiated re-referrals; Hispanics were less likely to have a child removal; *Court-ordered Family Reunification*: Hispanic and larger household sizes less likely to be re-referred, Blacks less likely to be reunified; larger household sizes less likely to have a child be removed.)

Agency Comparisons in Terms of FPS Outcomes Achieved

Substantial variation in results was found across individual contract agencies, and between those serving the same regional office sites. For example, about 1 in 4 of the families had, on average, a CPS re-referral after Court-ordered Family Maintenance services. But the range across agencies was 8.6% to 32%. Child removals were fairly low at 6.8% but removal rates ranged from 1.3% to 14.3%. For court-ordered family reunification during FPS, the 2005-2010 study period, 23.5% of families experienced a child reunification – but agency performance varied significantly from 7.7% to 58.3%.

The contractor average outcome ratings and an examination of the distribution of individual contractors indicate that most FPS agencies are achieving positive outcomes for a substantial proportion of the families served. In certain areas, however there is a wide range in the outcomes achieved, indicating room for improvement. These data patterns raise the question about what the highest performing band of agencies are doing on a daily basis to achieve those higher rates of positive outcomes (when the same agencies tend to have a high level of performance across many outcome domains). They also raise questions about the extent to which internal operational patterns in different regional offices may affect relationships with FPS agencies (e.g., underutilization, referral of families with higher risk profiles, preference for referring more court-ordered versus voluntary families).

DCFS Worker Perceptions of FPS Contracted Services

Supervising Children's Social Workers (SCSWs) and Children's Social Workers (CSWs) were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with various descriptive statements about two FPS agencies they were familiar with (those with contracts to serve their regional offices) as part of an overall Survey on Family Preservation Services (FPS Survey). SCSWs and CSWs indicated that they generally agreed with statements such as:

- FPS contract agency staff treated families with respect
- FPS contract agency services improved family functioning
- FPS contract agencies understood DCFS policies



SCSWs' overall ratings of Client Engagement and Service Delivery ranged from an average rating of 3.02 to 3.16. These ratings pertained to their overall satisfaction with the agencies and the quality of interaction with families, respectively. CSWs provided somewhat similar ratings for the same sub-domains; namely, from 3.14 for overall satisfaction with agencies to 3.27 regarding quality of family interactions.

However, results from SCSWs also suggested that there was a fair amount of variation in respondents' perceptions of the agencies with which they worked and the quality of services that those agencies offered. Specifically, it seems that SCSWs tend to rate some agencies higher than others on the two domains contained in the survey -- Client Engagement & Service Delivery, and Type of Family Preservation Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DCFS TO REFINE FAMILY PRESERVATION SERVICES

After examining the data, conferring with DCFS FPS managers, and talking with various stakeholders, the FPS evaluation team made the following recommendations:

1. Increase the consistency of the FPS referral process across regional offices, assuring that intake criteria are applied in the same way by contracted agencies.
2. Revisit policies to ensure clarity and consistency of processes and criteria guiding re-referrals for additional allegations of maltreatment while Family Preservation cases remain open.
3. Review and re-formulate the intervention strategies described in the FPS contract to reflect current understanding of evidence-based and evidence-informed strategies.
4. Require a core set of assessment measures and performance indicators across all FPS contract agencies, including more precise service start and end dates.
5. Form a FPS Learning Network to facilitate continuous refinement of FPS contract agency performance and refine FPS interventions.
6. Incentivize FPS contractor program quality and fidelity.
7. Refine service cost measurement.
8. As with the Residential Based Services reform underway in LA and three other California counties, up to six months of post-permanency services should be paid for.
9. The staffing capacity for the DCFS FPS contracting unit should be examined because it may need to be increased to more adequately monitor and coach the FPS contract agencies, now that the FPS learning collaborative has been formed.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DCFS CONTRACTORS TO REFINE FAMILY PRESERVATION SERVICES

1. Re-examine the types of specific interventions and how they are delivered currently to ensure that they best meet the needs of the families being served.
2. Identify ways that the DCFS FPS contract staff could assist them to utilize more evidence-based interventions, including parenting skills groups, and the interventions delivered by the home-based services staff.
3. Identify with their local DCFS offices and DCFS FPS contract staff ways to improve the case referral process.
4. Collaborate with DCFS to highlight evidence-based programs that are underway or in planning stages by FPS contractors or their networks to identify key strategies that could be supported by or collaborate with FPS.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, most of the FPS agencies are providing effective services, when measured against many of the current contracting performance standards and other benchmarks. Caution, however, must be used when interpreting these data as processes for referring cases and intake criteria differ across regional offices. So the level of consistency that is necessary for rigorously comparing FPS contractors was not present, and thus contractor A might have been serving a somewhat different mix of families than contractor B, and providing a different mix of services with different levels of results.

Billing data also suggest that FPS interventions varied across contract agencies (and to a lesser extent, perhaps even across contracts that one agency held to serve different regional office sites) in ways that may have affected outcomes. More precise tracking systems are needed to ensure continuous quality improvement; this will assist DCFS managers in more accurately tracking what services are being provided to what kinds of families, with what level of outcomes, and at what cost.