L.A. COUNTY

Child-welfare panel considers DCFS revamp

Tues 3-11-14 Daily Breeze

Blue-ribbon commission reaches out to states with proven protection policies

By Christina Villacorte
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Almost a year since 8-year-old Palmdale boy Gabriel Fernandez was allegedly tortured to death at the hands of his mother and her boyfriend after social workers repeatedly dismissed reports that he was being abused, a blue-ribbon panel is reaching out to welfare agencies across the country for ways to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again.

Preparing to make its final recommendations to the Board of Supervisors next month, the Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection sought ideas Monday from public and private agencies that have successfully reformed their welfare systems to better protect abused and neglected children — and through those changes, saved lives.

In an exclusive interview with the Los Angeles News Group, the commission's Chairman David Sanders, who led L.A.'s Department of Children and Family Services from 2003 to 2006, said he wants to take proven programs and tailor a strategy for Los Angeles, which supervises the care of about 30,000 children and responds to some 180,000 allegations of abuse and neglect each year.

As the largest public child-welfare agency in the country, DCFS social workers are faced with high caseloads, poor training, outdated technologies and insufficient coordination with law enforcement and other agencies that care for children.

"The fact that the Department of Children and Family Services has had over 700 recommendations over the last five to 10 years points to how many good ideas are out there and how difficult it is to make these kinds of changes," he said.

The supervisors created the commission in June 2013 amid public outcry over the death of Fernandez, whose history of abuse had been reported to — and dismissed by — DCFS social workers.

Hoping to avert any similar tragedies, the commission

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invited child-welfare agencies from Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Michigan and Florida, all known as success stories in the field.

Sanders — who left DCFS to become an executive at Casey Family Programs, the nation's largest foundation focused on foster care, with some $1.6 billion invested on services to benefit children and families — noted even though the other states used different techniques, they had three things in common.

"There was clarity about accountability," he said. "Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, has one person in charge of multiple services; in Tampa, Florida, they had privatization, but those agencies had their contracts terminated if they weren't successful. Also, there was clarity about what they were trying to accomplish. In Tampa, they wanted to reduce child fatalities, while in Allegheny, they wanted more children to be safe in their own homes."

Sanders pointed out that each of the visiting agencies also found partners to help achieve their goals.

"There was a recognition that this isn't the sole responsibility of the child-protection worker," he said. "In some cases, the community was involved."

Tennessee Department of Children's Services Deputy Commissioner Scott Modell said his agency worked to create a system that learns from its mistakes and doesn't rely on punitive responses like firing caseworkers, believing those address only the symptoms of an agency's problems and more sustained reforms are always needed.

"Errors are not random, isolated events — they really are emergent properties of the system," Modell told the commission.

"If all you do is fire a person, you don't make the system any safer. In fact, there's ample evidence in other industries to suggest that makes the system less safe, because people are less likely to report because they're afraid."

Michigan is notable as the only jurisdiction to use a child-fatality review process to hone its reforms.

Colin Parks, manager of the state's Child Protection and Family Preservation Program Office, said there are panels in place specifically to study how and why children die, resulting in the institution of programs addressing everything from safe-sleep education and child-care licensing to child-passenger safety and crib and trigger locks.

In Pennsylvania, 34 county departments were consolidated into just five, and one person was put in charge of the newly unified Department of Human Services, providing a much clearer chain of command and accountability. L.A.'s DCFS currently has 36 departments, several of which handle child-welfare cases.

After Florida outsourced child-welfare services to local community organizations, child homicides in the Tampa Bay area dropped dramatically.

Lorita Shirley, executive director of the area's Eckerd Community Alternatives, said the region had as many as nine child homicides in 2011.

That number is down to zero, thanks to the innovative use of federal funding, better tracking of data and increased community meetings.

L.A. County is not considering privatizing DCFS, but it is increasingly relying on community organizations to become partners in foster care and other services. "We were really inspired by what happened in Tampa, which got to zero homicides of children at the hands of their parents or caregivers," Sanders said. "That's a goal Los Angeles should aspire to."

Claims say Baca OKd inmate's handling

LA Times 3-7-14

Filing gives first hint of defense strategy for deputies charged with hindering FBI probe.

By Robert Faturechi

Former Sheriff Lee Baca and his top aide authorized the controversial handling of a Los Angeles County jail inmate who was found to be secretly working as a federal informant, according to a court filing by three of the deputies facing federal charges in connection with the incident.

The allegations that the operation, dubbed "Pandora's Box" internally, was directed by Baca and former Undersheriff Paul Tanaka are not new. But the claims, filed this week in federal court, give the first indication of the defense strategy that will be used by the jailers accused of helping to hinder a federal investigation.

In the filing, to which federal prosecutors have not yet responded, the three deputies' attorneys argue that their clients — deputies James Sexton, Mickey Manzo and Gerard Smith — were following orders from their bosses and assisting in what they thought was a legitimate criminal investigation.

The operation was launched after sheriff's officials discovered that one of their inmates, Anthony Brown, was using a cellphone to communicate with the FBI and secretly gathering information about deputies suspected of being corrupt or abusive.

The Times first reported in 2012 that when sheriff's officials got wind of Brown's cooperation with the FBI, they allegedly took part in a conspiracy to hinder the probe.

[Sheriff, from AA1]

According to federal prosecutors, they hid Brown rather than turn him over to federal authorities, who had obtained a court order for him to appear before a grand jury to testify about jailers' misconduct.

Brown's name on custody records allegedly was changed and he was moved out of the jail to a distant holding cell. Staffers were told not to allow U.S. agents to have contact with him, according to an indictment unsealed in December.

In the defense filing this week, first reported by the website WitnessLA, the attorneys for the three men argue that they "cannot be criminally tried for assisting a law enforcement investigation into what they reasonably thought was potential criminal activity."

The attorneys are referring to the FBI's act of smuggling into the jail a cellphone for Brown. According to the filing, the phone had photos of drugs and cash, and Brown told deputies after his cover was blown that he was working with a "fed" who participated in the smuggling of cellphones and drugs into the jail.

"LASD officials believed that the actions had to be that of a rogue FBI agent, finding it unfathomable that a fellow law enforcement officer would put lives at risk by giving an inmate a cellphone and allowing him to distribute methamphetamines, cocaine and other drugs in the jail," the filing states.

A 2012 Times review of Brown's history found that the FBI's informant was a bank robber and crack cocaine addict who had a history of lying and making dubious allegations against law enforcement.

In the past, Baca has downplayed his involvement, and a department spokesman has said the goal of moving Brown around was to protect him from deputies seeking revenge, not to hide him from the FBI. Baca has said he had been assured that he was not a target of the probe.

Tanaka, who is running for sheriff, has maintained that his role in the Brown case was minimal and that it was being led by Baca.

A spokeswoman for the FBI declined to comment on the allegations. A spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office said prosecutors would respond next week.

In a separate case, two deputies pleaded not guilty Thursday in connection with allegations that they assaulted a handcuffed inmate. Deputies Joey Aguiar and Mariano Ramirez are among the 21 current and former sheriff's officials charged in connection with the federal probe into brutality and other misconduct in the Sheriff's Department.

Aguiar and Ramirez are accused of violating the civil rights of an inmate by assaulting him in 2009 inside Men's Central Jail by kicking him in the head, striking him with a flashlight and pepper-spraying his face.

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Valley will be key in race to succeed Yaroslavsky

Sun 3-9-14 LA Times

By Catherine Saillant

Kim Gutierrez needs help keeping a growing population of homeless men from chasing down customers at her Studio City doughnut shop.

A few miles north, Alma Dellafuente is frustrated having to wait weeks — sometimes months — for specialized care at the county-run San Fernando Health Center.

And in Sherman Oaks, retiree Hal Schneider and his wife, Rose, worry about taxes going up to pay for mass transit that may never reach their part of the San Fernando Valley.

In years past, all could take their concerns to longtime Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky. But newly activated term limits will force Yaroslavsky to step down Nov. 30 from a post he's held for two decades.

Lining up to replace him are eight candidates. But none are well-known to West Valley residents, making the 3rd District's Valley vote up for grabs in the June 3 primary election, political analysts say.

"For somebody to win, they have to win the Valley," said Jill Banks Barad, a Democratic consultant and Sherman Oaks resident. "It's a Westside seat, but it's also very much a Valley seat."

The district has nearly 2 million people from the Westside and Hollywood in Los Angeles to Calabasas and San Fernando. But about two-thirds of them live north of Mulholland Drive and the Santa Monica Mountains. That Valley portion typically supplies roughly half the vote.

In a recent interview, Yaroslavsky said turnout could be low for the midyear contest in which Gov. Jerry Brown is considered a shoo-in for reelection. But he agrees that the Valley portion of his district will play a key role in determining his successor.

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[Valley, from A31]

"The Valley's up for grabs whatever turnout will be."

Former Los Angeles city controller and mayoral candidate Wendy Greuel, a Valley native, had been expected to be a serious contender in the contest. But she dropped out in January and announced that she would seek the seat of retiring Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Beverly Hills).

The remaining candidates include Sheila Kuehl, who represented portions of the West Valley during 14 years as a state lawmaker. Kuehl has been running for nearly a year and has raised $429,400 for her campaign.

John Duran, a West Hollywood City Council member, said he's raised $130,000, more than twice what he reported at the end of December. Attorney Bobby Shriver, a former Santa Monica City Council member and nephew of President Kennedy, entered the race in late January and hasn't ruled out using his personal wealth to finance a campaign.

Others who filed for the race by Friday's deadline include Pamela Conley Ulich, a lawyer and former Malibu mayor; Doug Fay of Santa Monica; Yuval Daniel Kremer of Los Angeles; Rudy Melendez of North Hollywood; and Eric Preven, who describes himself as a county watchdog.

The most politically prominent candidates have been busy meeting Valley residents and interest groups to gather endorsements and raise campaign contributions. Kuehl picked up key backing last week from the San Fernando Valley Democrats, a coalition of 27 Democratic clubs.

"We just felt she was very well prepared for the job," said Agi Kessler, the group's chair. "She seems to really understand the position."

The Valley Industry & Commerce Assn., a business group, will hold a forum in April but hasn't yet decided if it will endorse a candidate, said Stuart Waldman, the group's executive director.

Waldman said he initially thought the race would be a "battle royal," but that hasn't happened. Kuehl, Shriver and Duran are all liberal Democrats, so there isn't much choice for those with a more conservative outlook in the nonpartisan race, he said.

"I think the biz community as a whole was looking for someone else to jump into the race," Waldman said. "But for some reason all of the ambitious politicians don't want to run."

Voters in more conservative Calabasas, Northridge and Woodland Hills could be critical in a close election, and the candidates will have to tailor their messages to attract them, said Tom Hogen-Esch, a political science professor at Cal State Northridge.

"Greuel was the prohibitive favorite," Hogen-Esch said. "With her gone, I think it will come down to some pivotal endorsements. Zev Yaroslavsky's endorsement will be highly coveted."

Yaroslavsky so far hasn't named a favored candidate and says he probably won't. Kuehl and Shriver are both "very competent, very smart and, in their own way, dynamic people," he said.

"Sheila is the tortoise in this race, and Bobby is the hare," he said. "I don't know if it will end up that way."

One problem the candidates will face is explaining what the Board of Supervisors does and what that means for the Valley, Hogen-Esch said.

The five supervisors oversee the nation's largest county government, with 101,000 workers and a $25-billion budget — three times that of the city of Los Angeles — funding welfare, public health and foster care programs.

The board also directs the collection of property taxes, runs elections, maintains vital records and has an indirect hand in managing the nation's largest system of jails.

Steve Afriat, a government lobbyist and Valley resident, said none of that resonates with the average middle-class suburban voter, who is more concerned that taxes don't go up too much and that the Valley is getting its "fair share."

"Zev was the guy who kept the county in the black, and people are going to want someone to continue to do that," Afriat said.

"More affluent voters in Encino, Sherman Oaks, Calabasas, they would say they are glad he's held the line on spending, and they're going to support someone who articulates that."

Transportation is also a "huge issue" with Valley voters, said Waldman, the business group executive. If the Valley were a city it would be the sixth largest in the country — but it still doesn't have a rail system, he said.

The next supervisor will sit on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board and have influence over whether a proposed East Valley Transit Corridor runs along Van Nuys or Sepulveda boulevards.

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Times data analyst Sandra Poindexter contributed to this report.

Sun 3-9-14

Inmate release policy may be revised

L.A. County sheriff's officials consider a more holistic look at the risk of reoffending.

By Abby Sewell and Jack Leonard

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is considering a new system for deciding which jail inmates get released early by making predictions about who is most likely to commit new crimes.

The proposal calls for a significant shift for the nation's largest jail system, which currently determines when inmates get released by looking at the seriousness of their most recent offense and the percentage of their sentence they have already served. Officials say the current system has weaknesses because it does not take into account the inmate's full record, including serious crimes that occurred years ago.

Supporters argue the change would help select inmates for early release who are less likely to commit new crimes. But it might also raise some eyebrows. An older offender convicted of a single serious crime, such as child molestation, might be labeled lower-risk than a younger inmate with numerous property and drug convictions.

The Sheriff's Department is planning to present a proposal for a "risk-based" release system to the Board of Supervisors.

[See Jails, A20]

County may change jails' early release system

[Jails, from A1]

"That's the smart way to do it," interim Sheriff John L. Scott said. "I think the percentage [system] leaves a lot to be desired."

Assistant Sheriff Terri McDonald said at the center of the new system would be a computer program that uses each inmate's criminal history to calculate the chance he or she will reoffend, and release those deemed lowest-risk first.

In addition to making release decisions, the tool could be used to assign inmates to education and treatment programs while in jail, and to decide which are eligible for alternatives to jail such as home confinement.

"It's more sophisticated to look at risk," she said. "It makes common sense to most people."

The department could choose to override the automated risk scores for inmates convicted of certain crimes, but McDonald said it's too early to say whether it would.

The Sheriff's Department has not calculated the cost of the system but hopes to seek bids on the project soon if the Board of Supervisors approves. Because the L.A. County jail system is the largest in the nation, it's difficult to compare it to smaller jurisdictions or state corrections agencies that have used similar systems.

Just as car insurance companies draw on accident data to calculate the risk of someone causing a future crash, law enforcement tools analyze factors that have been shown to have a strong effect on whether someone is likely to reoffend.

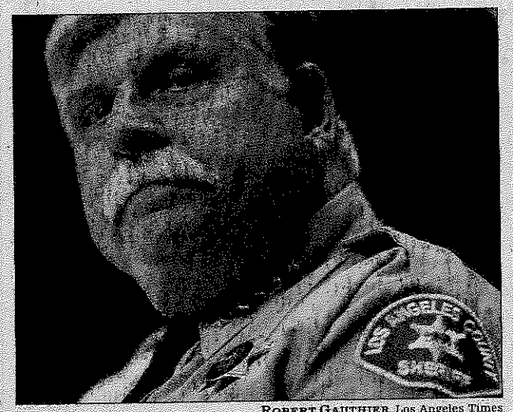
Among them are an offender's age, gender and criminal history. For example, younger men with extensive criminal records are statistically more likely to commit new offenses than older women who are first-time offenders.

Many law enforcement agencies — including the L.A. County Sheriff's Department — already use risk assessment tools to decide what programs to place inmates in while in custody. Others use assessments to decide the level of supervision offenders get after their release from jail or prison.

One of the few places in California using risk assessment to decide which inmates get early release is Riverside County, which releases thousands of inmates early each year to comply with a federal court order to reduce overcrowding.

About a dozen staff members are tasked with reviewing the files of newly booked inmates daily to decide who could be released if the jails hit capacity.

They first narrow down potential early releases to those whose most recent crime is nonviolent, and then release those who fall in the lowest risk categories within that group, Riverside County's Correctional Chief Deputy Jerry Gutierrez said. They look at sentenced inmates as well as those awaiting trial.



ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

INTERIM SHERIFF John L. Scott said Los Angeles County's current system for deciding which inmates should be released early "leaves a lot to be desired."

The staffers look at current charges, criminal history and behavior while in jail, and review court minutes and other documents to rank the inmates most and least suitable for release. In some cases, they also use the results of a lengthy series of personal questions put to the inmates in an interview.

When the jails hit 97% capacity, the staffers compile a list of inmates who could be suitable for release. Each recommendation must go through several levels of approval by supervisors, eventually landing on Gutierrez's desk. Although it's labor-intensive, he said the system helps to ensure that the most potentially dangerous inmates spend more time behind bars.

"We don't want to let anybody out [early]," Gutierrez said. "Every day we have to evaluate who's the absolute best of the worst if we have to release somebody."

Gutierrez said the department is working on getting a system in place to track how many inmates go on to commit new crimes. And it is looking at ways to improve the system, including possibly implementing an automated program like the one Los Angeles County is considering.

The number of early releases in Los Angeles County has ebbed and flowed since a federal judge ruled in the late 1980s that keeping jail inmates in the county's cramped, overcrowded conditions amounted to cruel and unusual punishment.

The pressure on the jails has increased the last two years with realignment, the California law that shifted the burden of housing many nonviolent felons from state prisons to county jails. Los Angeles County's system is housing an additional 6,000 inmates at any given time under realignment, none of whom are released early.

In part to make room for that population, the department has freed tens of thousands of other inmates early.

Men convicted of nonviolent crimes are generally freed after serving as little as 20% of the time they had left in jail after their sentencing hearings. That's in addition to credits under state law that mean most inmates already serve only half of their sentences. Women convicted of nonviolent crimes are generally freed after serving 10%. Men and women convicted of certain serious crimes, including robbery, assault with a deadly weapon and misdemeanor child molestation, are released after serving as little as 40% of their remaining terms.

The new tool L.A. County is considering would be a streamlined system using data from the California Department of Justice. California's corrections department uses a similar tool to decide how much supervision to give parolees. Washington state has a comparable system to help decide the level of supervision for released felons and how much time can be knocked off their sentences for good behavior.

A follow-up study in Washington found that about 47% of inmates in the highest-risk group returned to prison within three years, while 10% of those labeled low-risk did.

Susan Turner, a UC Irvine criminology professor who helped develop the system California's corrections department uses, said the tool has an approximately 70% accuracy rate in its assessments — similar to the accuracy of other risk assessment systems that include a more involved interview process.

"The tool is not 100% accurate, and that's what many people get stuck over," she said. "No risk assessment tool is 100% accurate.... We're trying to predict human behavior."

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ELECTIONS 2014

Bring on the candidates

California voters will have plenty of important decisions to make this year. Let's do our homework.

MONDAY IS opening day, of sorts, in the 2014 election season.

In the races for governor and seven other statewide offices, for Congress and the Legislature, and for four key Los Angeles County offices, everything up until now has been a kind of political spring training, with potential candidates testing their messages and building their war chests. But filing closed Friday, and now we're underway. Although election day is officially June 3, voting begins the first week of May, less than 60 days from now. The exhibition season is over. Candidates are playing for keeps.

The highest-profile of them is of course California's seemingly perpetual governor, Jerry Brown, now seeking his fourth term in an office he first won in the post-Watergate, pre-disco era. Twists in the term-limits law and the longevity of his political career have already allowed him to set the state's record for time served as governor. A fourth term would be unprecedented.

Four other Democrats — currently serving as lieutenant governor, attorney general, insurance commissioner and the officially nonpartisan superintendent of public instruction — are seeking reelection for their final terms. Three Democrats are termed out as controller, treasurer and secretary of state. In each of those races, Republican and other challengers have an opportunity to make their case for ending the Democratic Party's four-year monopoly on power in constitutional office and its two-thirds supermajority in the Legislature.

But catching the voters' attention may be an uphill battle. What's the difference between a controller and a treasurer? What does the secretary of state do, and doesn't John F. Kerry already have that job? Why will there be automatic November runoffs for state offices but not necessarily for local offices? We'll do our best to answer such questions on this page, along with our recommendations of the candidates for all statewide offices who are most likely to serve California well.

There will be some high-profile congressional campaigns too, with Democratic stalwart Sen. Henry Waxman and longtime Republican Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon vacating their seats. There is a special off-year election to fill a Los Angeles Unified School District board seat left vacant by the death of Marguerite Poindexter LaMotte.

In Los Angeles, though, it is the usually obscure or noncompetitive (or both) county elections that may bring the most sweeping changes, because of a 2002 term limits measure.

Now Supervisors Gloria Molina and Zev Yaroslavsky are reaching the end of tenures that began two decades ago. Two other supervisors, Don Knabe and Michael D. Antonovich, will follow two years from now. That kind of sharp turnover in board membership has been unseen in modern Los Angeles and will bring opportunity for progress and potential for disaster. It is imperative that candidates demonstrate their understanding of the job they are seeking, and that they let voters know just how they intend to improve the operations of county government and the service it delivers to more than 10 million people.

It would hardly be enough, for example, to gripe about county government's record in protecting children from neglectful or abusive parents or foster parents, or to rail against its treatment of youth in probation camps or its abandonment of thousands of mentally ill to jails and the streets. Voters are well within their rights to demand explanations, diagnoses and, above all, straightforward plans for improvement. Candidates should expect to talk about their positions on transit, housing, economic development and environmental protection.

The same term limits were meant to apply to the sheriff, and would have ended Lee Baca's tenure this year. Baca went to court to block application of the law to his office, and he won — but he left this year anyway amid allegations against his deputies of jail inmate abuse and obstruction of justice. His departure presents voters with the first seriously contested race for sheriff since Baca's first campaign in 1998, and the first time in decades that there has been no incumbent seeking reelection.

The sheriff's race will require candidates to explain how they intend to fix the longstanding problems of inmate abuse, bad hiring practices, financial mismanagement and poor planning. They should expect to present their plans for better treatment of mentally ill inmates. They should discuss how they intend to meet their duties to house felons who previously would have gone to state prisons. They would be wise to detail what they would do to prevent the need for Department of Justice officials to sue over civil rights violations, and what they would do if such a suit is nevertheless threatened and a consent decree ensues.

And amid all of that, voters must try to weigh candidates for Los Angeles County assessor, Superior Court and the Board of Equalization.

Wait — the board of *what*?

Citizenship is a demanding job and politics can be a confusing game, but they're worth the time and attention required. Play ball.

Boys' plight raises red flag

A county program to keep families unified is scrutinized after toddlers found on street.

3-12-14

By Garrett Therolf

Two hungry children were wandering the streets of South Los Angeles alone last week when they walked into a liquor store, searching for a loaf of bread.

At one point, they nearly headed across busy Manchester Boulevard until a passerby intervened.

The children's ages: 2 and 3. Both wore soiled diapers when authorities picked them up.

This week, officials acknowledged that the children and their mother had been under the direct supervision of Los Angeles County's child protective services agency. The family was enrolled in a program designed to help the mother keep her children while learning to be a better parent. A social worker had repeatedly cleared her as safe during monthly visits, and counselors hired by the county were meant to aid with the monitoring, according to sources familiar with the case.

"Something didn't work here," said Philip Browning, director of the embattled child welfare department.

He referred the case to internal affairs investigators, but said the early findings have raised concerns about the safety of some children in a county program known internally as Family Maintenance.

The Department of Children and Family Services had allowed the mother, 32-year-old Sidnicka Wilson, to enter the program for relatively low-risk families even though she had lost six older children to the foster care system. She had a record of stealing and prostitution, court documents show. When she was arrested, police say she had cocaine in her possession.

Family Maintenance is meant to serve as a six-month intervention strategy for

[See Toddlers, A11]

[Toddlers, from A1]

children at relatively low risk of abuse. It allows them to remain with their parents while their families are offered counseling, emergency shelter care, parent training, substance abuse testing and transportation.

"The Family Maintenance cases are the ones that are most concerning to me," Browning said. "We have more families in this program than I would really like."

The program is seen as an easier and cheaper alternative to foster care, which is perennially short of parents and funding.

It now has more than 13,000 children. A decade ago, there were about 8,000.

Wilson and her boys were in the program for months but for how long was unclear.

Caseworkers are supposed to offer a family only two three-month extensions beyond the first six months, and only if they can show that the parents are complying with the department's demands and demonstrating that safety risks will be removed. Further extensions are meant to be rare and require approval by high-level department officials.

Nevertheless, 1,600 of the children now in the program have remained there for more than 12 months.

After months of receiving services, police found last week that Wilson's home was filthy with nothing but rotten food in the refrigerator. Officers said the boys looked malnourished and dirty.

Wilson was arrested on two felony counts of child abuse, one count of drug possession and misdemeanor charges that include giving false information to an officer. She is being held in county jail and her two boys were placed in foster care.

After Wilson's arrest, police learned that her 3-year-old son had wandered into the liquor store looking for food at least twice before.

Wilson's six oldest children were fathered by five

SIDNICKA WILSON was arrested after her boys, 2 and 3, were found on a South L.A. street.

> 'The Family Maintenance cases are the ones that are most concerning to me. We have more families in this program than I would really like.'
>
> — Philip Browning, director of the county's child welfare department

men and were all removed by county caseworkers previously, according to sources familiar with the case but who spoke on the condition of anonymity. One of those children is in foster care, another is with a legal guardian and four received adoptive families after Wilson's parental rights were terminated, the sources added.

The 3-year-old had been placed in foster care in 2011 after caseworkers substantiated that he was suffering from general neglect and that Wilson and the boy's father were incapacitated or absent, the sources said. He was returned to the family in 2013 under a court order after caseworkers recommended reunification.

The youngest boy was also removed by caseworkers after he was born and was placed in foster care. But he was also returned last year. Wilson herself was involved with the county's foster care system as a child, the sources said.

She should have been flagged before the abuse of her first child started, said Marilyn Flynn, dean of USC's School of Social Work.

"All our data tells us, this is the exactly the type of person where there is a high probability that she will abuse or neglect her child," Flynn said. "Ideally, we would have identified this mother when she was in the hospital and we would have offered her support and training with her first child."

The problems monitoring the family's progress was compounded, Browning said, by the department's inadequate computer tool for assessing a child's risk of being abused. Known as Structured Decision Making, the software asks a series of questions and produces a recommendation on how to proceed in the case

But the development of a replacement for that tool is months or years away, and the field office responsible for the boys' neighborhood in South Los Angeles continues to labor with some of the county's most difficult cases, highest caseloads and least experienced workers.

"The agency and the county as a whole clearly need better tools to manage what are often very difficult and complex caseloads," Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who represents the area, said in a prepared statement.

The county's Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection, formed last year in the aftermath of a series of child fatalities, will issue recommendations next month.

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Times researcher Kent Coloma contributed to this report.