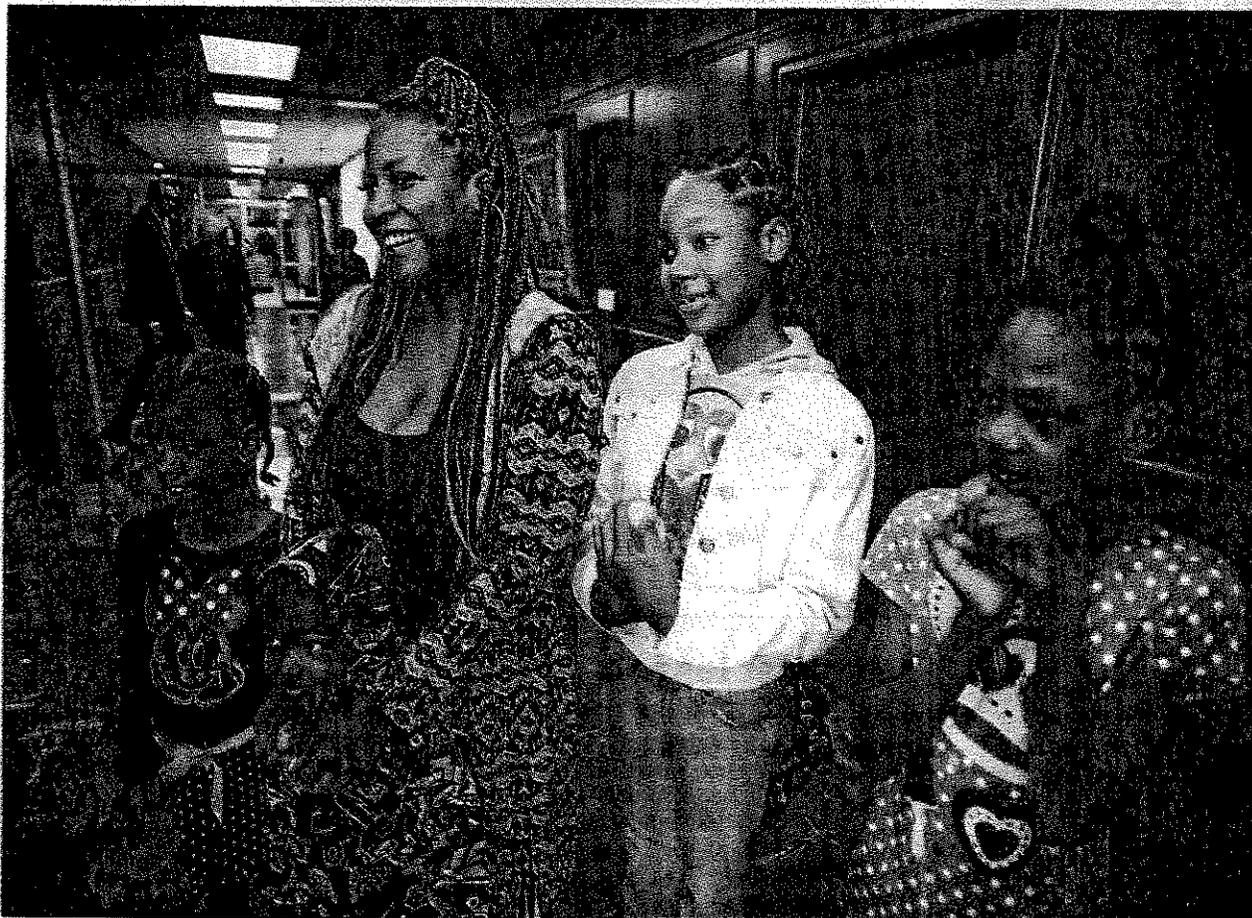


TOGETHER AGAIN

Families: County honors parents who worked hard to reunite with their children

Success: DCFS, criticized for oversight, touts stories with a 'happy ending'



PHOTOS BY DAVID CRANE — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Tashasha Richmond, a hearing-impaired mother, is honored during the county Family Reunification Heroes celebration for her work to reunite with her children: Tyeesha Baskerville, 7, left, Tristan Baskerville, 5, Tionna Smith, 11, and Jalisha Smith, 9.

By David Montero
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On a clear night four years ago, Angel Ramirez got ready to sleep in a parking lot again. Homeless, strung out from years of heroin use, he thought this — after years of hitting bottom — was, in fact, rock-bottom.

He was alone. Broke and broken. His sister didn't talk to him anymore, his children hardly knew him sober, and the weight of shame he carried on that patch of hard asphalt in East Los Angeles seemed to prove it was the lowest point in his life.

Ramirez said he just looked up into the dark sky and cried out.

The memory was fresh Tuesday when he recalled

the gang ties, the jail time and the hopelessness. He stood up — sober since 2010 — and thanked Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services officials who helped him start to get his life back.

And his children back.

Ramirez, 49, of Los Angeles, joined three other parents honored at the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors meeting as DCFS officials marked the fifth annual celebration called Family Reunification Heroes. Each parent who had been chosen from a board member's district, received a scroll and a picture with a board member.

Fesia Davenport, DCFS chief deputy director, said restoring families is a large part of the department's mission.

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Angel Ramirez, right, is honored at the fifth annual Family Reunification Heroes event by the Board of Supervisors for his efforts to stay sober and get his children back.

"In addition to honoring our heroes, we are the ones in the public and the community that understand more often than not, we have a happy ending ... to be celebrated rather than to be criticized."

— Fesia Davenport, DCFS chief deputy director



Angela Dozal is honored at a Family Reunification Heroes event for her work to reclaim her kids.

DAVID CRANE — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Families

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"These are the types of success stories we see every day," Davenport said. "In addition to honoring our heroes, we are the ones in the public and the community that understand more often than not, we have a happy ending to be celebrated rather than to be criticized."

Criticism has hewed closely to DCFS recently. Last month, a lawsuit was filed in Los Angeles Superior Court by a nonprofit alleging the agency violates state welfare codes. In response to an 8-year-old Palmdale boy's 2013 death, the Board of Supervisors established a Blue Ribbon Commission and revealed findings in April that included a characterization that "a state of emergency exists" in the county's child-protection system. Its sweeping reforms were adopted in June. And DCFS spokesman Neil Zanville said the agency is continuing to review a case of a 2-year-old in Signal Hill who died last month while under the watch of DCFS.

The agency, Zanville acknowledged, has had a perception as a group that breaks up families. In July, 17,800 children were out of homes due to determinations made by caseworkers that a child was in danger.

But the honors Tuesday, Zanville said, were to show the other side of the DCFS mission. Over the course of 10 years from 2004 to 2013, 59,741 children were reunified with families, an average of about 6,000 per year.

Superior Court Judge Michael Nash, who has been serving on the bench in juvenile court since 1990, said the reunifica-

tions are the work of parents who choose to change their lives, caseworkers who enable the changes and public and private entities who fight to bring the families together.

"They say it takes a village, and it does," Nash said.

Angela Dozal agreed, thanking social workers and reunification guide Amber Choate, who helped her through the five-month period when her children had been removed from her care.

The 47-year-old from Redondo Beach said that happened on Nov. 8, 2013, when she was put in the hospital involuntarily due to abuse of painkillers she took following four neck surgeries.

She said she was lying in a hospital bed when she got a text message from her teenage son, Dakota, that read, "They're taking us."

It startled her so much, it almost negated the effect of the drugs she'd ingested.

Dakota told her later that two law enforcement officers and a DCFS case worker knocked on the door and when he answered it, he was confused by their presence. But teenage stubbornness was no match for power of the county. Jesse, his 13-year-old brother, couldn't stop crying. Their sister wondered if the separation would be permanent.

Dozal said she spent the next five months working to cut down her reliance on the painkillers. On March 24, DCFS reunited her with her kids.

"I have three amazing children who really held their own, especially when I was out of their home," she said in a small ceremony prior to the board meeting honors. "It's hard to accept this because I still feel

I should never have had them taken in the first place. That is my bad."

She stood in the room Tuesday and started to choke up.

"I'm still learning to forgive myself," she said.

When she finished speaking, Tashasha Richmond waved her hands in the air — applause in sign language. The 29-year-old mother of four from Gardena is hearing-impaired, and when it was her turn to speak, she had an interpreter accompany her to the front of the small room. At the end of the table, Jalisha, 9, said excitedly, "Mommy!"

Richmond smiled. She didn't know what to say, so she simply offered thanks and went back to her seat, but not before Jalisha intercepted her and hugged her.

Alex Iglesias, director of the nonprofit Los Angeles Dependency Lawyers, said Tuesday that people might be skeptical about honoring parents for doing what they should have been doing in the first place.

"Not all of us were lucky enough to be born into a family with one good parent — much less two that were good role models," he said. "Some had the unfortunate circumstance to be born into families where there was domestic violence, where there was alcoholism, where there was child abuse."

He paused. "I hope the parents take what they've learned and keep it in their heart," he said.

Ramirez did. After the ceremony, his voice quivered as he noted that his 5-year-old was student of the month at his school and that his 7-year-old was student of the month twice last year.

As he stood in the halls outside the board room, he pensively looked ahead.

No shame. Just pride.

Putting families back together

Tashasha Richmond, above center, with her children, from left, Jaliesha, Tyeesha, Tionna and Tristan attend a tribute Tuesday at the Hall of Administration marking Family Reunification Week, which honors parents who overcome prison, addiction and other hardships to be reunited with their children. At right, Angel Dozal, center, poses with children, from left, Jesse, Dakota and Cheyanne after being reunited with them.



Boy, 2, ^{Thur} dies in ⁹⁻⁴⁻¹⁴ mom's ^{LA} custody ^{Times}

The home was under supervision by child welfare agency, which calls death homicide.

BY GARRETT THEROLF

Los Angeles County sheriff's homicide detectives are investigating the death of a 2-year-old Signal Hill boy who was under the protective supervision of county social workers when he died.

Josue-Rey Maldonado was pronounced dead Aug. 10 after being taken to a Long Beach hospital. A county Department of Children and Family Services report reviewed by The Times says the "apparent mode of death is homicide" and notes bruising was observed on the boy's body. But sheriff's detectives said an official cause of death would be determined after a coroner's investigation.

Josue-Rey's death came after child welfare workers decided to leave the boy in the custody of his mother as she received court-ordered services to improve her parenting skills, along with regular visits from social workers, according to the report.

Last year, social workers investigated a complaint that Josue-Rey had been abandoned, that the father had used methamphetamine and that the boy had

[See Child, AA4]

3 children taken from home after boy dies

^{Thur 9-4-14 LA Times}

[Child, from AA1] been present during a domestic violence incident involving a gun, the report said. The inquiry found substantial evidence of neglect by both parents, according to the report.

A court later validated the general neglect finding, which requires a preponderance of evidence, and ordered special support services for the family, according to an official familiar with the case.

Another official familiar with the case, who requested anonymity because the matter is considered confidential, said the father was no longer living with the boy and his mother at the time of Josue-Rey's death. The DCFS report said that the boy was in the care of his mother, Jessica Cereceres, and her boyfriend, Samuel Aguilar, when he died. Neither responded to requests for comment.

According to witness accounts in the DCFS report, Josue-Rey was seen the night before his death with facial bruises. He had vomited and was not alert, but was not taken for medical treat-

ment, the report said.

Early the next day, he was taken to the hospital with signs of physical abuse, the report said. Doctors pronounced him dead after resuscitation efforts failed, the report said.

Other children in the home — ages 1, 3 and 5 — were taken into protective custody, and the 1-year-old was treated at the hospital for bruising and liver problems, the report said.

Neighbors told The Times that police had visited the home on Lewis Avenue on more than one occasion in the days leading up to the death.

However, Signal Hill Police Chief Michael Langston said he had found no record of visits or complaints regarding the family.

No charges have been filed in the case. Sheriff's detectives say they are continuing to interview relatives, neighbors and potential witnesses.

Dozens of children have died of abuse or neglect in recent years after being brought to the attention of the county's child welfare agency. After the beating

death of 8-year-old Gabriel Fernandez of Palmdale, the county Board of Supervisors established a blue-ribbon commission, which has called for sweeping changes to the system.

Gabriel was found with his skull cracked, three ribs broken, and skin that was bruised and burned. BB pellets were embedded in his lung and groin, and two teeth were knocked out.

The Times reported last year that social workers had investigated six reports of abuse in his case but allowed the Palmdale boy to stay with his birth mother and her boyfriend. Sheriff's deputies separately investigated at least four reports of mistreatment but did not remove the boy or report the complaints to county welfare workers. The mother and boyfriend are facing murder charges in the case.

The majority of reform recommendations presented by the blue-ribbon commission on child welfare are still pending before the county's elected board.

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A foster care fix

Sun 9-7-14 LA Times

THOUSANDS OF CALIFORNIA children who have suffered abuse or abandonment are sent to live with strangers in foster homes. That often happens even if there are extended family members ready and willing to take them in, despite California laws requiring placement with relatives when possible, and even in the face of countless studies that show the kids do better in the long run after stays with relatives rather than strangers.

So why do we keep doing it? Because so many of those relatives, retired or with their budgets maxed out raising their own kids, need a bit of financial assistance to be able to take in their nieces and nephews, siblings or grandchildren — and because under a complicated and outdated set of state, federal and local laws and rules, they can get only a tiny fraction of the funding that non-related foster parents get. Worse yet, there is a shortage of foster parents, so the children often end up being sent to group homes, which are the most expensive option and produce the least desirable outcomes. Government foolishly requires itself to pay more to get worse results.

Family members taking responsibility for relatives in the foster care system are expected to use money available under CalWORKS. But those poverty-level funds represent a small fraction of what other foster

families get to ensure children are adequately fed and clothed.

This year's California budget goes a long way toward fixing the problem. It provides money that counties can use to bring financial aid for many eligible relative caregivers up to the same level they would receive if they were non-relative foster parents. All the counties have to do is opt in by Oct. 1 to be in line for 2015 funding. Why wouldn't they?

A few counties may be skittish because they know that if they opt in, they are in all the way: They must pay all relative caregivers who take in children even after the state funding runs out. It stands to reason that they'd want to know how many families will seek the funding.

But counties always have the option to change their minds and opt out, even mid-year. Besides, Los Angeles County, which has the largest number of children who need places to go after abuse or neglect, and the largest number of relative caregivers ready to step up if only they had some assistance, has a federal waiver that gives it even more flexibility than other counties have to allocate money for just such a purpose. Yet Los Angeles County has yet to act.

The clock is ticking. The county has just over three weeks left to act or lose by far the largest chunk of the state's \$30-million fund for relative care for a year. It's time to opt in.

Kindler, gentler probation

WED 9-10-14 LA Times

PEOPLE CONVICTED OF misdemeanors often serve a stint in jail and are then subject to probation, a period of oversight during which the offender, ideally, meets various conditions that may include holding down a job, attending class or completing a drug rehab program. The idea is to ensure that the person convicted of the crime has the wherewithal and the attitude to avoid getting into trouble again. Unfortunately, a criminal record, even for a misdemeanor, too often weighs against the offender in the search for work or school or job-training placement.

Many people convicted of misdemeanors are sentenced directly to probation, especially in counties such as Los Angeles, where jails are crowded and cells are generally held for the most serious criminals. For the offenders, that means they don't have to lose their jobs or school placements while in jail. But they still end up with criminal records that could hinder their full reintegration into society as law-abiding members.

Some states have recognized that they can do even better by putting probation on the front end. The defendant pleads guilty and complies with various conditions, including monetary restitution, and the judge can opt not to enter the plea or conviction.

At the end of a year, presuming the offender has made amends, he or she is on a better track and winds up with no criminal conviction. If the conditions aren't met, the conviction is entered and the offender sentenced.

Hawaii has had a great deal of success with a version of the program. Virginia has its own twist, with some good results.

So how about California? Lawmakers here have slowly — very slowly — come to realize that we convict and lock up too many people for less serious crimes and in so doing put people on a path that limits their chances to move on with a crime-free life.

Gov. Jerry Brown has on his desk a very modest bill, AB 2124, that would allow a pilot program, only in Los Angeles County and only for five years, giving judges discretion to hold on to a defendant's guilty plea without entering it and to defer sentencing for first misdemeanor offenses, subject to full restitution and other conditions. Judges like it and prosecutors don't, because the discretion to determine whether the defendant should have the opportunity to make amends before, rather than after, the sentence rests with the judge — as it should.

The governor should sign the bill and set in motion one more very small effort to make California's criminal justice system a little smarter and more forward-looking.