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Foster America – A Component of Child Welfare System Improvement

As one of the largest child welfare systems in the nation, Los Angeles County’s (County) primary objective is to protect the lives and well-being of its most vulnerable children, youth and their families. In 2017, the County received 170,054 referrals to investigate allegations of child abuse. The types of abuse reported included physical, emotional, sexual, severe and general neglect, and exploitation. Countless reports have demonstrated the need for new strategies to improve Los Angeles County’s child welfare system and to build on its success.

Through outreach efforts and engaging with stakeholders directly involved in the child welfare system, the County has received feedback on additional critical measures for evaluating and redesigning its current system. Feedback received include information gathered from youth who grew up in the system, social workers who work tirelessly to keep children safe, and countless child welfare experts who report both the positive efforts and the flaws of the system. All agree that the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is not solely responsible for the safety and well-being of

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the County's children and youth. Vulnerable youth require the support of DCFS as well as other County departments, such as, the Department of Mental Health (DMH), the Department of Public Health, the Department of Health Services, the Office of Child Protection (OCP), Probation, and community partners that commonly serve vulnerable children, youth, and their families.

At the State level, California is working to implement preventive supports to families in keeping children safe from maltreatment and keeping children out of child welfare placement, especially congregate care settings, through Continuum of Care Reform (CCR). The County has engaged in efforts to both implement CCR and to access new state and federal funding streams to more robustly support at-risk children and families with home and community based preventive services. The advent of CCR works to build the capacity of foster parents and relative caregivers, thus creating more family-based care for children and youth who otherwise would have been placed in congregate care settings.

The County is poised and ready to significantly improve outcomes for children and families. Since 2014, Los Angeles County's Blue Ribbon Commission and the subsequent creation of the OCP have brought the County's most influential stakeholders together in new and powerful ways. It is a unique time in which both DCFS and DMH have new, visionary leaders at their helm. Additionally, the active community of philanthropic partners has joined the County in creating the Center for Strategic Partnerships. Their collaborative work is establishing the direction for new ways of working together, to elicit and ignite change.

The County has embarked on integrating programs that work across departments and with community partners to effectively serve our children and families

(i.e. Prevention and Aftercare Networks, Home Visiting, co-locating mental health staff in other county department settings). Partnering with Foster America, whose mission is to improve the lives of America's most vulnerable children and families, will augment these efforts. Foster America, a Project of Tides Center, works towards building a pipeline of cross-sector leaders and innovators to help transform our country's approach to child welfare. Their unique highly-competitive executive fellowship program places talented mid-career professionals with diverse skills and backgrounds directly into high-impact leadership positions with government and nonprofit agencies serving foster children and families at risk of child welfare involvement.

Foster America has successfully placed fellows in nine other jurisdictions across the country. Their fellows have been instrumental in creating systemic changes in Rhode Island and New York, among other locations. For example, one fellow worked to improve the recruitment approach and customer experience of potential kinship and foster families resulting in a 25% increase in the number of kinship and foster families licensed by Rhode Island in a single year. A fellow in New York collaborated with the Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare to develop a statistical model and to inform New York City and national guidelines regarding governance structures that promote race equity in use of predictive analytic models.

In support of the County's efforts to improve the child welfare system, DMH seeks to fund Foster America fellows with talent in human-centered design and strategy. DMH also seeks to leverage funding from private foundations to support the hiring of these fellows to partner with DCFS. Human-centered design professionals are skilled in systems redesign, experience mapping and qualitative research. These fellows will be embedded full-time with our County leadership for an 18-month

fellowship where they will oversee key components of our vision for change to improve the lives of children and families served by our system. The fellows' projects will be developed in collaboration with County agency leaders to meet the local needs and will fall into one of two categories: 1) prevent abuse, neglect and placement in foster care, or 2) improve the experience and outcomes of children and youth in foster care. Their skills will be utilized in the areas of Prevention, Transitional Age Youth, health integration and specialized foster care.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Instruct the Director of the Department of Mental Health to provide up to \$1.2 million to fund an eighteen-month contract with Tides Center for five full-time fellows, through its Foster America Project, to help address the largest issues that we are encountering in effectively serving children and families, as well as protecting children from abuse or neglect;
2. Delegate authority to the Directors of the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Children and Family Services, in conjunction with the Center for Strategic Partnerships, through a public-private partnership, to enter into an eighteen-month contract with Tides Center, to recruit and provide its Foster America Project fellows that will work with County leaders as they continue to improve our child welfare system. The contract will be funded by the \$1.2 million provided by Department of Mental Health and funds raised by philanthropy;
3. Delegate authority to the Director of the Department of Mental Health to execute amendments to this contract as needed to accommodate unanticipated program needs and increase or decrease the maximum contract sum by 10% to accommodate any unanticipated increase or decrease in units of service; and

4. Direct the Center of Strategic Partnerships in conjunction with the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Children and Family Services to seek input from relevant stakeholders, including philanthropy, on the proposed scope of work which may include assisting County Departments with a systems analysis of all the child serving agencies; cross-departmental collaboration; and best ways to prevent child maltreatment, increase self-sufficiency and permanency for transitional age youth and build capacity of kinship and foster families.

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