

MOTION BY SUPERVISOR HOLLY J. MITCHELL

July 13, 2021

Toward a Color-Blind Child Welfare System: Pilot Program for Safeguarding Against Racial Bias

Historically, in the United States, the child welfare system’s policies and practices share roots with England’s “Poor Laws,” which resulted in the removal of children from their parents for social harms brought about by poverty. The child welfare system was equally enmeshed with slavery, wherein children were sold to apprenticeships, thereby separating children from their parents. These harms, while centuries ago, brought about well-documented inequities within the child welfare system and among Black and Latino families.

Locally, Los Angeles County (County) has attempted to address these inequities with the Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity workgroup, an expansion of prevention services to reduce the likelihood of system involvement, and the establishment of the Office of Equity within the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Though numerous efforts have been directed toward reducing disproportionality and disparities in the modern child welfare system, inequities persist with only a modest improvement in the number of Black and Latino families represented within the County’s child welfare system. Many well-informed scholars, researchers, advocates, journalists and, most importantly, parents, have argued these disproportionalities and disparities persist due to implicit bias and other systemic failures, including pervasive poverty,

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inequitable education and employment opportunities, and ongoing hyper-surveillance of Black families. Alarmed and troubled by data which revealed that Black children were 15 times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care than their white peers, one child welfare system in New York sought to change this through a novel strategy known as “blind removal”.

Blind removal meetings are a relatively new strategy created by the Director of Child Welfare in Nassau County, New York. The removal is blind because the case worker who has already seen the family and conducted an initial assessment of risk presents the facts of the case to a committee. Importantly, demographics and neighborhood locale are not mentioned in the presentation. All identifiable information on the case file is redacted and the discussion is focused on what has occurred, relevant history, and family capacity and strengths. After the presentation of the case, the committee makes a recommendation as to whether the child(ren) should be removed from the family. To reiterate, this all transpires without knowledge of the child(ren)’s race or ethnicity, or any other identifying information which may make the committee susceptible to guessing the child(ren)’s race or ethnicity.

Dr. Jessica Pryce’s evaluation of blind removals in New York revealed significant reduction in disparities among Black children in foster care. In 2011, 57% of the children entering New York’s foster care system were Black. Five years later, in 2016, that number was reduced to 21%. The child welfare staff also reported that blind removal meetings helped increase their awareness of institutionalized racism, implicit bias, and even helped them recognize biased internal beliefs in their own practice. In recognition of these achievements, in October 2020, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services required that local social service departments develop and implement the blind removal process statewide.

The County is home to the largest child welfare system in the world. On the surface, it arguably bears no resemblance to a small county in New York. The workforce in the County is significantly more diverse. The system’s size is inordinate, and the populace is as unique as it is varied. The geography is far reaching, spanning the coast, deserts, mountains, suburbs and cities. The sheer size, over 4,000 square miles, is

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approximately ten times that of Nassau County (483 miles). Yet, the similarities for children in foster care are many. A recently published Mother Jones article¹ profiling “*the unending tragedy of foster care during a pandemic*”, paints a stark picture of the haunting similarities between New York and the County’s child welfare systems. Sadly, in 2020, in the County, three quarters of children removed from their homes were Latino or Black, in a county where Black children are five times more likely than white children to be ensnared by the child welfare system. This reality compels County leaders to respond decisively with bold action. Blind removals present that opportunity, among other reform efforts.

Safety is the utmost priority in our County’s child welfare system. The legacy of child fatalities, including Gabriel, Anthony and Noah, among numerous others, demands this focus. To that end, applying the blind removal strategy presents an opportunity to hone safety considerations by assessing a family on the merits of their case, without the distraction of race. Likewise, the blind removal strategy presents the County with an opportunity to incorporate safety considerations for all families, not just those who identify as Black. Importantly, blind removals can also inform the degree to which implicit bias may impact the well-meaning and diverse workforce that comprises DCFS. Finally, blind removals may aid the County in determining where its safety strategies can be improved.

The County has taken bold steps to address racism and inequities across its departments and services. This historic moment of focus requires the Board of Supervisors (Board) to boldly address practices that may unnecessarily fracture families and disrupt a system that can impose unintentional, yet lasting, harm upon children and families. If we are to fundamentally change the lives of the most vulnerable residents here in the County, we are required to meaningfully interrogate and reimagine the foundations of systems that perpetuate harm within our communities. We have the power to redesign systems that hurt our neighbors more than they heal and support them. Blind removals may be one such strategy, among many other needed reforms, toward doing so.

¹ <https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2021/03/mommy-how-come-i-only-see-you-on-the-phone/>

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Therefore, the Board must be committed, and act to advance equity and meaningful support for our children and families in our care and charge.

I THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

Instruct the Director of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to:

1. In consultation with the Executive Director of Los Angeles County's Anti-Racism, Diversity and Inclusion Initiative (ARDI) and in partnership with the UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families, to pilot blind removals in at least one regional DCFS office. The pilot shall include evaluation, proper training and support from experts versed in racial bias and blind removals and commence within 120 days.
2. Report back in writing within 60 days with a pilot implementation plan which includes the aforementioned components identified in directive one.
3. Report back in writing every 90 days after implementation of the pilot, for the next year, on the status of the pilot and conclude with an academic report on the findings of the pilot, as well as recommendations for future implementation, and policy and practice reform.

I FURTHER MOVE THAT THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

Direct the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to:

1. Identify \$150,000 in funding to support the evaluation, training and support provided by the UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families.

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(KD/ME)