

Memo on Upfront Family Finding

Purpose: This memo is offered in the hope that it will lead to Commission advocacy for locating funding for a *system-wide rollout* of the Upfront Family Finding (UFF) program. It is widely accepted—and mandated by law (WIC 309)—that early identification of relatives is crucial to making successful relative placements, and that it is preferable to place children with relatives as the first placement, when possible and appropriate, with increased additional support from relatives who may not be able to foster, but do want to play a part in the child’s life. UFF aligns with the County’s efforts in the following areas: reducing disproportionality and disparity, increasing the trauma-informed nature of our child welfare practice, and improving the continuum of care by increasing family-like placements. A related matter is preventing disruption of nonfamily foster placements when relatives enter the picture only after a child has been placed.

Background. Two events that occurred In May of this year brought the implementation of the Upfront Family Finding (UFF) program more prominently to the Commission’s attention. First, the Commission received a letter from AdvoKids, an advocacy organization based in northern California, stating that calls to their hotline for issues relating to dependency matters showed that the Department of Child & Family Services in Los Angeles County was failing to inform relatives of children being detained in a timely manner and failing to uniformly send the JV-285 form to relatives so that their willingness to provide support can be made known to the court. AdvoKids was requesting that the Commission join with their organization in taking a role in improving this situation.

Second, Director Cagle reported that UFF, intended as a system-wide rollout, would be implemented in *only one additional office* this year rather than the remaining 9 offices. In response to questions about the barriers to system-wide implementation, he explained that the department lacks funding for the \$8.1 million it would cost.

Exploratory efforts. In order to more fully understand the program, its implementation to date, and the scope of the problem with use of the JV-285, if indeed there is a problem, I met with Leslie Heimov of CLC, Margaret Coyne and Jessica Kastner of AdvoKids (and authors of the letter), and Jane Gonzalez, Sari Grant, and Aldo Marin of DCFS. In addition, I reviewed relevant documents, including Board of Supervisors motions on the topic, forms used for UFF and the two program evaluations of UFF conducted by Child Trends, in 2018 and 2020. Finally, I met with Diane Iglesias of DCFS to learn specifically about the JV-285 and the status of its use at DCFS.

I will briefly summarize the relevant information.

Board Motions.

1. On May 31, 2016, the BOS approved a motion directing DCFS and the Probation Department, in conjunction with the courts, to establish an Upfront Family Finding program, to be coordinated with DCFS’s existing Permanency Partners Program (P3). The motion sought to increase relative and nonrelative extended family member placements and the overall role of relatives. In

response to the motion, a countywide UFF protocol was developed and piloted in two regional DCFS offices (Glendora and Santa Fe Springs) in October 2016, and one Juvenile Hall (Los Padrinos) in November 2016. At that time, the pilots were planned to run six months, with a progressive rollout to remaining regional offices, halls and camps countywide. The countywide rollout was anticipated to be completed by the end of Fiscal Year 2017/2018.

The Office of Child Protection (OCP) hired Child Trends to evaluate the pilot, beginning in March 2017. By October of that year, kinship placement for children in the two pilot offices had increased to 80%. The UFF protocol was expanded to two more offices (Vermont Corridor and West Los Angeles) in January 2018.

2. On June 21, 2017, DCFS submitted a progress report. Both DCFS pilot regional offices reported increases (22% and 23%) in the number of relative placements during October 2016-May 2017.
3. On January 26, 2021, by which time UFF had become operational in ten offices, the BOS passed a motion to expand the UFF program to the remaining ten offices, in a multi-year expansion plan to be completed in Fiscal Year 2022-2023. The program had demonstrated an impressive rate of 81% kinship placement from January through June 2020. The cost of expansion was estimated at \$8.1 million annually.
4. An as yet unanswered question is the actual breakdown of the quoted cost (\$8.1 million) to extend the program system-wide.

Program Evaluations by Child Trends.

1. In a November 2018 evaluation of the UFF Pilot, Child Trends found that the pilot met its goal of increasing relative placements and engaging more relatives to provide support to children in both pilot offices. Child Trends also found that the pilot helped shift the office cultures toward a more positive perception of relatives as resources.
2. In February 2021, Child Trends submitted findings on long-term outcomes. The study compared children placed with relatives through UFF to children placed with relatives in offices not implementing UFF in order to isolate the effects of UFF specifically.
3. Some key findings:
 - a. Children placed through UFF were equally likely to consistently stay with relatives during their time in care as children placed in offices not implementing UFF.
 - b. In the interest of placing children quickly with relatives, workers in UFF offices sometimes placed children in short-term relative placement while helping another relative prepare for a longer-term placement. In non-UFF offices, children were less likely to be placed with relatives or when they were, it happened less quickly. But they were less likely to move from first relative placement to another.
 - c. UFF did not change the likelihood that children placed with relatives would reunify with their parents.
 - d. UFF was associated with greater likelihood that children placed with relatives would be adopted or have a finalized guardianship.
 - e. Findings from the expansion offices indicated implementation was close to pilot offices.

- f. The majority of children in the program (94%) had at least one relative willing to provide some type of support (28% interested in visits; 25% in phone calls, 13% to assist with monitoring parent-child visits).
- g. Findings indicate that the program can be scaled successfully throughout the county.

The JV-285 relative information form, a requirement of WIC 309.

When AdvoKids contacted the Commission, and in my subsequent phone call with them, they highlighted what they saw as LA County's failure to send out JV-285 notices (required for all known relatives), creating potential situations of disruption to placements (or adoptions) when relatives enter the scene after placement has occurred, and sometimes long after. DCFS is currently engaged in a legal process with AdvoKids related to this (and perhaps other matters).

Size of the problem being reported by Advokids: Advokids provided data indicating that about one-third of the calls to their hotline were from LA County. Their total number of calls statewide was 781 in 2019-2020 and 683 in 2020-2021. Given that our county is home to greater than 30% of foster children in California, the fact that LA accounts for one-third of calls seems reasonable. Further, only about half the calls from LA in each year were from relatives who did not receive the JV-285, suggesting that it was approximately 25 relatives for each of these years.

Despite what is a small sample size of identified problem, and because the opportunity for relatives to speak up about their interests in providing connection or support is so important (and a legal requirement), it was important to learn what DCFS is doing with regard to the JV-285 form.

DCFS does not currently track or have a way of knowing how many social workers send out or otherwise make available these forms, nor how many are received. The JV-285 is not currently the responsibility of any one person or office to oversee, and is likely implemented differently across regional offices. However, in recognition of the critical importance of relative involvement in placement stability and success, there is currently ongoing work to incorporate a link to the form in the letter that goes out to all relatives. In addition, DCFS is partnering with a company that has technology that can rapidly identify a person's relatives and contact information. It has been used in other contexts and can be adapted for this use. DCFS is also mindful of the need to expand CSW training to more pointedly include and explain the importance of enabling relative interest and contact with children entering care.

Recommendation to Commission.

Rationale for recommendation. There is nothing more urgent than the well-being of the children who come into our care. Separation from family, no matter the circumstances, is traumatic and devastating to all parties. The need to feel connected to family is universal. We are the guardians of that connection for the children in our care (and their families). Placement with relatives decreases (or at least doesn't increase) the trauma that removal creates. Placement with relatives is undeniably preferable to other settings in the continuum of care. Even when placement with actual family is not possible, we have recognized that family settings are better for children than congregate or institutional ones. And we know that resource families are in short supply. Upfront Family Finding has

demonstrated its effectiveness in securing more and faster placement with relatives and NREFMs over the past five years.

UFF can contribute to decreasing racial disparity and disproportionality in our child welfare system by returning children to their families, rather than bringing them into other foster care settings. While they may be under system supervision for a period, they are nevertheless with people to whom they are connected. When children can remain in their communities, both geographically and culturally, there is less potential for feeling “othered” and more possibility of positive ethnic identity development. And, UFF has demonstrated that children who are placed with relatives have a greater likelihood of adoption into a relative home or a relative legal guardianship—and are then able to exit from the child welfare system.

UFF has broad support from the Board of Supervisors, and no opposition. It is one of the few programs at DCFS that is supported by concrete and discernible data. It is cost effective financially, and represents a true and solid investment in the current and future lives of L.A. County’s children.

Finally, the Commission’s advocacy for this worthwhile program, if successful, would constitute an important and enduring contribution to the lives of the children and families touched by child welfare

Recommendation for your consideration:

That the Commission for Children & Families, in its capacity as an advisory body to the Board of Supervisors, write a letter to the Board, respectfully urging the following:

1. Given the many benefits of UFF, make an expanded system-wide roll out of this effective program a priority; seek funding to make it a reality for all children entering care without delay.
2. Develop training to increase the knowledge and motivation of social workers regarding the importance of engaging relatives of all children in care to increase the circle of extended family connections who wish to and can be involved.
3. Develop a system that can track regional office efforts to engage relatives and those of the department as a whole, including via use of the JV-285, in children’s lives, underscoring the importance of these activities.