

Mitigating Financial Barriers to Family Reunification in Los Angeles County

The juvenile dependency system is charged with ensuring that children at risk of abuse, neglect, or abandonment are protected and seeks to strengthen families by providing services, supports, and interventions geared at protecting the health and safety of children with the goal of reunifying them with their parents whenever possible. In many cases, when children are removed from their parents, the juvenile dependency court orders parents to complete reunification services that are tailored to address the issues that resulted in dependency court intervention. The court then reviews progress made by parents and determines whether it is safe to allow children to return home. However, parents have a limited amount of time to regain custody of their children, and, pursuant to California law, a parent’s failure to regularly participate and make substantive progress in court-ordered programs during prescribed timeframes justifies the continued removal of children from their parents that can eventually become permanent.

Notably, in California, the law does not permit a juvenile court to remove children from the custody of their parents simply due to indigence or financial difficulties

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experienced by the family, including a parent's inability to provide necessities such as clothing, housing, or childcare. However, in Los Angeles County, once the juvenile court removes children from their parents due to risk of abuse, neglect, or abandonment, parents' financial circumstances can affect whether they will be able to ultimately regain custody of their children.

Los Angeles County has the largest child welfare system in the state of California and one of the largest nationwide. In many cases, parents are court-ordered to participate in several different programs to address the issues that brought their family into court. It is not uncommon for parents to be ordered to complete parenting classes, mental health treatment, individual counseling, drug and alcohol treatment programs, domestic violence for survivors groups, domestic violence for perpetrators programs, anger management classes, and more. However, most of these programs are not free, and Los Angeles County is the only County in the state that does not pay for a parent's reunification services. Poverty amongst families in the United States has surged with the end of pandemic-related benefits, and, unfortunately, the families that come within the purview of the juvenile dependency system are overwhelmingly impoverished. In juvenile dependency cases, the court appoints counsel for parents who cannot afford legal representation, and, currently, there are over 15,000 indigent parents with court-appointed counsel in Los Angeles County. The costly program requirements to regain custody of their children only further exacerbate the financial issues faced by these families that are already struggling financially. Additionally, the assistance given to parents to locate services is minimal, and, in many cases, parents are simply provided with lists of referrals that they must navigate, thereby putting the onus on parents to contact providers to

determine if enrollment is possible. In addition to the significant time spent trying to locate programs that are open for enrollment, geographically convenient, and aligned with a parent's schedule, parents who are struggling financially in Los Angeles County experience further difficulty or outright inability to complete these programs due to the cost burden.

There have been recent legislative efforts to address ways that the juvenile dependency system effectively punishes poverty and simultaneously disproportionately affects indigent people of color. Last year, Senate Bill 1085 (Kamlager) was signed into law and made it clear that indigence or other financial difficulty are not solely sufficient to justify juvenile dependency court involvement. Assembly Bill 954 (Bryan) seeks to amend California law to further clarify that, once removed from parental custody, an inability to pay for reunification services due to poverty cannot serve as a basis to keep families separated, recognizing that this practice punishes poor families (the majority of which are Black or Brown), further traumatizes children, increases costs of foster care and supervision, and contributes to further stress and emotional turmoil felt by families.

Los Angeles County must take affirmative steps to assist thousands of parents with limited financial means in accessing and completing their court-ordered reunification services. Identifying funds to pay for or otherwise greatly subsidize costs of reunification services would deliver the most impact. Short of paying for parents' reunification services, assisting parents with accessing free or low-cost options to enable them to actively participate in and complete court-ordered family reunification services is necessary. For instance, increasing Medi-Cal enrollment among parents and families would enable parents to utilize health benefits to assist with payment for services such as mental health

treatment, inpatient and outpatient drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, and individual counseling. Additionally, Los Angeles County's Chief Information Office is developing a centralized provider registry of service providers to operate as one component if a "no wrong door" approach to accessing services within the County. Utilization of this technology to develop and maintain a comprehensive registry with real-time capacity and availability data points would help parents more easily enroll in these free or low-cost services, complete their court-ordered programs, and reunify with their children—the ultimate goal of the child welfare system.

I, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Direct the Department of Children & Family Services, in collaboration with the Department of Public Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Health Services, Probation, and the Department of Public Health, to report back in 120 days on the feasibility of paying for family reunification services.
2. Direct the Department of Children and Family Services, in collaboration with the Department of Public Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Health Services, and the Department of Public Health, to ensure that all parents in the juvenile dependency system are assessed for and assisted with enrollment in available public social services, including, but not limited to Medi-Cal, and that all available funding streams, including, but not limited to, CalAIM, are leveraged to fund family reunification services.
3. Direct the Department of Children and Family Services, in collaboration with the Department of Public Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, the

Department of Health Services, and the Department of Public Health, and in consultation with the Los Angeles Superior Court, to explore models to ensure parents receive assistance in accessing services, including the possibility of staffing the Los Angeles County Juvenile Dependency Courthouses with dedicated staff who can provide enrollment assistance.

4. Direct the Department of Children and Family Services, in collaboration with the Chief Executive Office, the Chief Information Office, and any other relevant partners, to ensure there is adequate information sharing amongst relevant County departments as it relates to multi-system service delivery to families by assisting in the ongoing development of a provider registry and/or contracting with a centralized provider registry that identifies free or low-cost services and service providers, complete with availability information, to address the issues facing parents in juvenile dependency proceedings, including, but not limited to, appropriate parenting, domestic violence, substance abuse, anger management, and mental health diagnoses.
5. Authorize the Director of the Department of Children and Family Services, in consultation with the Chief Executive and County Counsel, to retain a consultant, if needed, to help the Department of Children and Family Services implement a comprehensive reunification services program and to enter into non-financial agreements, as needed, to realize the above directives.

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