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Blind Removals Moving Forward: Color Consciousness and Safeguarding Against Racial Bias

On July 13, 2021, the Los Angeles County (County) Board of Supervisors (Board) unanimously passed, *Toward a Color-Blind Child Welfare System: Pilot Program for Safeguarding Against Racial Bias*¹, which aimed to address the disproportionate rate of Black children in foster care. The pilot program, modeled after Nassau County and in partnership with UCLA’s Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families², was implemented in two Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) regional offices (West Los Angeles Office and Compton-Carson) over the span of 2 years. The pilot called for the evaluation, training, and support from subject matter experts on racial bias and blind removals, including a series of 6 report backs from inception to conclusion, along with an academic report on the findings and recommendations for policy and practice reform. In 2023, the findings from the pilot were released, *Beyond Blind Removal: Color Consciousness and Anti-Racism in Los Angeles County Child Welfare*³.

The concept of blind removal is “blind” since the assigned social worker’s only interaction is to conduct an initial assessment, which helps contain the possibility of bias

¹ <https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/159902.pdf>

² <https://pritzkercenter.ucla.edu/>

³ <https://pritzkercenter.ucla.edu/researcharchive/beyond-blind-removal/>

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from influencing the investigation process, including the crucial period when a removal decision is made. Once the initial assessment is complete, the facts are presented to a committee, where all identifiable information of the case file is redacted and the discussion is solely focused on what has occurred, relevant history, and family capacity and strengths. After the case presentation, the committee makes a recommendation as to whether the child should be removed. The intent of omitting knowledge of the child's race or ethnicity, or any other identifying information, is to safeguard against implicit bias. The goal of blind removals aids the County in determining where its child safety strategies can be improved.

Reevaluating the systems and practices the County employs to deliver services to families is one that requires regular reflection, evaluation, and evolution, to ensure that we are leaving families stronger than how we found them. Although the intent of assuring that a child is free of abuse and neglect is one that can be perceived as being well intended, all too often, the process to make such determination has proven to be more harmful than helpful. When dealing with the child welfare system, which has roots traced back to structural racism, the County must take accountability and acknowledge its role in normalizing and desensitization to the dangers that come with separating Black children from their families. Such desensitization often impacts the very professionals tasked with keeping our children safe and leads to the internalization of racial bias, which goes unchecked. The status quo of policies and procedures only fuels an already flawed system designed to "help".

There have long existed harms and inequities within the child welfare system, specifically among Black and Latino families. Black children experience separation from their parents at higher rates than their White counterparts. Many studies have argued that such disproportionalities and disparities persist due to implicit bias and other systemic failures, including pervasive poverty, inequitable education and employment opportunities, and hyper-surveillance of Black families. The County is home to the largest child welfare system in the country and in 2020, it was found that 1 in 3 Black and Native American children who turned 5 in the County were referred to Child Protective Services

at least once during the first 5 years of their life⁴.

Blind removals presented an opportunity to address racial inequities. The expansion of prevention services to reduce the likelihood of system involvement, and the establishment of the DCFS' Office of Equity have been other advances towards progress. Though numerous initiatives and programs, such as Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity and the Four Disciplines of Execution, have been established as tools in reducing disproportionality, inequities persist and continue to fuel the pipeline into a system that falls short in meeting the needs of Black youth and their families. The County took another bold step to address racism and inequities across its departments and services, with the creation of the Anti-Racism, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiative.

Safety is the utmost priority in our County's child welfare system. The blind removal pilot presented the County with an opportunity to incorporate safety considerations for all families, not just those who identify as Black. Staff shared that awareness of racial bias in their practice led to increased likelihood toward continued growth. It also increased their awareness of institutionalized racism, implicit bias, and even helped recognize biased beliefs in their own practice. The removal of a child from a parent often results in the breakdown of families and disrupts a familiar environment that can impose unintentional, yet lasting harm. To fundamentally transform the systems that serve residents in our unfinished communities within the County, we must reimagine the foundations of systems that perpetuate harm among families. The County has the power to redesign systems that often hurts families when the intention is to help and support them.

I THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

1. Direct the Director of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to:
 - a. Consider and incorporate as appropriate the recommendations found in the UCLA's Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families "Beyond Blind Removal: Color Consciousness and Anti-Racism in Los Angeles County Child Welfare" report, beginning with the implementation of upstream enhancements, targeting the root cause of disproportionalities among Black

⁴ <https://www.datanetwork.org/research/>

families and children in the child welfare system.

- b. Require Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity (ERDD) roundtables discussions at all DCFS regional offices. Normalize talking about race, including conversations during the review process, touch points and Child and Family Team Meetings, along with meaningful dialogue around anti-Black racism. Discussions and talks about race and disproportionality should be regular, and occur in both individual and group supervision, including unit and general staff meetings. Develop a departmental implementation and sustainability plan that will include, but not be limited to, the following efforts:
 - i. ERDD roundtable and debrief session discussions led by trained/skilled facilitators and/or coaches being held at all DCFS offices to build on equity practices.
 - ii. Creation of safe spaces that will allow trained/skilled facilitators and/or coaches to support staff and address the elevated emotions that may arise from having discussions about race and culture.
- c. In consultation with Anti-Racism, Diversity, & Inclusion (ARDI) Initiative, reimagine and transform the organizational culture of the workforce by conducting an equity audit on upcoming reform efforts, as well as direct practices and training. Identify gaps where current strategies are not being properly implemented or require improvement. Identify regional office champions to assist with implementation and accountability.
- d. In consultation with the Office of Child Protection, identify and determine that all external support is engaged, including members of impacted communities, the Commission for Children and Families, the Alliance for Children's Rights, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, trusted messengers, etc., for the ongoing development and evaluation of the DCFS' Office of Equity.

2. Delegate authority to the Director of DCFS, or designee, for the Office of Equity to identify and execute an agreement with an equity consultant to conduct racial

bias training, for DCFS University and new hire orientation, executive leadership, union representatives, management, hotline staff, Assistant Regional Administrators, Supervising Childrens Social Workers, Childrens Social Workers, and all applicable staff.

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