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Implementing an Innovative Specialized Child Welfare Program for Young

Children in Care

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is dedicated to serving one of the County's most vulnerable populations – children in foster care. While all children in foster care deserve trauma-informed care and services that meet their individual needs, those under the age of five and their families have unique needs and vulnerabilities that call for a specialized and intentional approach.

According to the UC Berkeley Child Welfare Indicator Project, over half of all newly detained cases statewide involve children under the age of five. Children under the age of five are more likely than any other age group to suffer tragic outcomes, including child fatalities. This is especially concerning because children between the ages of birth to three make up approximately one-third of the overall number of children in care in Los Angeles County. The disproportionality that is well-documented in the child welfare system extends to young children in care with data showing that Black and African American children between the ages of birth to five are seven times more likely to be detained in foster care than children of other races and ethnicities.

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The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study highlights the impact of early childhood abuse and neglect on the physical and socio-emotional development of children through the lifespan. Young children's brains have the most development in the first 3 years of life making early intervention especially critical to achieving positive outcomes for the child and entire family system. In addition, research shows that early investment in Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH), sometimes referred to as social and emotional health, has financial benefits through the child's lifespan. IECMH services are highly effective and offer a strong return on investment; every dollar spent on IECMH services can yield \$8.00-\$15.00 in savings per child (Oppenheim & Bartlett, 2022).

Well-established entities such as First 5 Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, and the Los Angeles Commission for Children and Families recognize that providing specialized programs and supports for children under the age of five and their families leads to better social, emotional, and educational outcomes. The many other agencies that touch families of young children earlier in the prevention trajectory such as hospitals, childcare, schools, community-based organizations and other county departments and offices are also well-placed to support families by referring them to appropriate supportive services and are valued strategic partners.

For several years, the Board of Supervisors (Board) has shown great interest in applying these same principles to the unique needs of young children in foster care. DCFS has responded to the Board's interest with proactive and innovative efforts. In 2024 DCFS helped establish the Helping Our Parents Excel (HOPE) court, the County's

first-ever courtroom dedicated to serving children under the age of three and their families. Additionally, in October 2023, DCFS established its Young Children in Care (YCIC) Birth to Five Program. In its first year, the YCIC Birth to Five Program successfully initiated implementation of a set of core components of a specialized program. Some of the program's early accomplishments include:

- Developed a Birth to Five Policy for DCFS (the first in the nation).
- Provided training and educational presentations to a cohort of staff in a fourth of all DCFS regional offices.
- Worked with community partners to begin identifying and expanding local service provider networks that can be accessed to support families.
- Provided specialized support to a fourth of all regional office staff (known as the "Birth to Five Champions") who are interested in developing an expertise in service delivery for young children in care and their families.
- Developed a consultation framework to improve appropriate identification of safety worries and to ensure staff are completing balanced and thorough assessments.

The team-driven approach of the YCIC Birth to Five Program gives social workers the confidence and support they need to make difficult decisions concerning children who are extremely vulnerable. The demand for support from the YCIC Birth to Five Program has exceeded the capacity of the three staff currently dedicated to the program. The need to develop and implement a fully operational program is clear. With a full team that includes leadership and experienced staff, along with a full array of community-based and government partners, the YCIC Birth to Five Program will be positioned to

meet the demand for support from the regional offices and to develop a clear, strategic countywide approach to working with young children and their families.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Department of Children and Family Services to take the following actions and report back to the Board, in writing, in 120 days:

1. Develop a proposal to establish a fully operational YCIC Birth to Five Program. The proposal should include a staffing plan; an estimated budget; a description of the program's purpose, structure, and scope; an analysis of the metrics and outcomes that will be used to assess the program's efficacy; and a plan for best practices in partnering with local community-based organizations, other County departments, and individuals with lived experience with the foster care system, to increase access for families to appropriate services and supports.
2. Partner with First 5 LA, the Commission for Children and Families, units within the Department of Public Health (the Office for the Advancement of Early Care and Education [OAECE] and Division of Maternal, Child, and Adolescent Health [MCAH]), the Office of Child Protection (OCP), the Los Angeles County of Education (LACOE), and community partners to prepare an analysis of current services and gaps, including an overview of existing community-based services, county-delivered services, and/or service provider network(s) that support young children in foster care and their families and/or address the needs of populations most impacted by the foster care system, as well as any known challenges that must be addressed to fully support

these families and recommendations to address them. This should include the Community Pathways 2.0 food security work.

3. Convene First 5 LA, the Commission for Children and Families, DPH (OAECE and MCAH), OCP, LACOE, and other community partners to develop a community-wide strengths and needs assessment framework and implementation recommendations that will support the Board's commitment to developing a specialized approach to serve young children in foster care and their families.

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