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Strengthening Early Childhood Prevention and Family Stability Using the Superior Court of Los Angeles County’s Hope Court Program as a Model

Infants and toddlers represent the fastest-growing share of children entering the Los Angeles County (County) child welfare system, and early system involvement is a strong predictor of continued contact with the dependency system. To mitigate these outcomes, the Superior Court of Los Angeles County (Court), in collaboration with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and community partners, established the Helping Our Parents Excel (HOPE) Court.

Located at the Compton Courthouse, HOPE Court is a dependency court program serving parents of infants and young children ages 0-3 who are at risk of entering foster care or are already involved in the child welfare system. The program recognizes that family separation can have lasting consequences for children and that long-standing racial inequities have contributed to the disproportionate involvement of Black and Brown families in the child welfare system.

HOPE Court focuses on early intervention and reunification, providing families with the tools and resources they need to thrive, while prioritizing child safety, well-being and

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healthy development. The program provides trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate judicial oversight and services for young children and their parents, reducing the trauma often associated with dependency court involvement, and promoting safe, stable relationships during the most critical years of brain, social, and emotional development. By building on this model, the County has an opportunity to shift from reactive intervention to prevention-based support that stabilizes families earlier, reduces family separation, and addresses long-standing racial inequities that shape child welfare outcomes for Black and Brown families.

HOPE Court uses a collaborative approach, engaging DCFS Los Angeles Dependency Lawyers, Children’s Law Center, County Counsel, and community partners to address family needs holistically, from mental health and housing to parental support, reducing barriers to reunification and long-term stability. By reducing structural barriers and fostering interagency coordination, HOPE Court improves case outcomes, strengthens family bonds, and helps ensure more children grow up safely with their families.

HOPE Court is modeled after the Safe Babies Court Team approach developed by ZERO TO THREE. This nationally recognized model is used in courts across the country.¹ The model is grounded in early childhood research recognizing that stable, nurturing relationships in the earliest years are essential to long-term health and well-being.

Since its launch in November 2023, HOPE Court has demonstrated meaningful impact and continues to operate successfully at the Compton Courthouse. The program currently serves 234 cases representing a racially and ethnically diverse population, including Latino/Hispanic, African American, and Asian families. Of these, 147 cases involve children ages 0–5, including 117 cases focused specifically on infants and toddlers ages 0–3. These cases are eligible for Families First Prevention Services (FFPS) and Evidence-Based Practice services; however, because FFPS funding is intended as a payer of last resort, HOPE Court serves as the primary source when services overlap,

¹ [Safe Babies](#)

consistent with FFPS eligibility criteria.

These cases reflect the Court's and County's commitment to keeping families safely together whenever possible and demonstrate HOPE Court's meaningful impact; however, they represent only a small portion of the overall juvenile dependency caseload in the County. According to the Court's Filings and Dispositions Data Dashboard, there were 13,937 juvenile dependency cases filed in 2024.² This underscores the importance of HOPE Court as a model for trauma-informed, prevention-focused practices and the opportunity to expand its benefits more broadly.

To strengthen early intervention and prevention efforts, a Birth to Five program called Young Children in Care has recently been established within DCFS, reinforcing a strategic focus on supporting families during critical early developmental years and reducing the need for deeper system involvement over time.

While the establishment of the Birth to Five program represents an important systems-level investment, it is equally critical to address core practices that directly influence early childhood outcomes and family stability within the child welfare system. Success is closely tied to the effectiveness of core child welfare practices that support early attachment and family stability. Therefore, family time, formally referred to as "visitation," between parents and their infants and young children is a critical protective factor and a cornerstone of successful family maintenance, reunification, and timely case closure, particularly for children ages 0-5 whose social, emotional, and neurological development depends on consistent, nurturing relationships with their parents.

Inconsistent, delayed, or limited family time has emerged as a significant barrier to progress in HOPE Court cases, undermining parental bonding, disrupting attachment, and impeding parents' ability to demonstrate capacity, stability, and engagement, all of which are key determinants in judicial decision making and case outcomes.

Despite the recognized importance of frequent meaningful family time, limited County and community-based resources, including shortages in family time supervision,

² Los Angeles Superior Court. *Juvenile Dependency Filings and Dispositions Data Dashboard*. Available at: <https://www.lacourt.ca.gov/pages/lp/research-and-statistics/cp/court-statistics>.

staffing constraints, space limitations, transportation challenges, and service provider capacity, have restricted schedules, limited flexibility, and disproportionately impacted families already facing systemic and economic barriers.

These limitations are particularly consequential for infants and toddlers, for whom even short disruptions in caregiver contact can have lasting developmental impacts, and for Black and Brown families who are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system due to long-standing structural inequities.

Strengthening and stabilizing family time support within the HOPE Court model is therefore essential to advancing early childhood prevention goals, supporting parent-child bonding, improving case outcomes, and ensuring that families have a meaningful and equitable opportunity to safely remain together and successfully exit system involvement.

I THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

1. Direct the Director of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Acting Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to work with the Superior Court of Los Angeles County (Court) to assess ways the County can support the Helping Our Parents Excel (HOPE) Court model and assist the Court should it choose to expand this innovative court model in other areas of the County and report back to the Board in writing in 90 days with a recommended support plan, prioritizing communities with:
 - a. High rates of child welfare system involvement for infants and toddlers ages 0–3;
 - b. Disproportionate representation of Black and Brown families; and
 - c. Existing prevention, Family Maintenance, and Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) eligible caseloads.
2. Direct the Director of DCFS, in collaboration with community-based organizations and faith partners, to develop and implement a strategy to expand culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate family time resources for HOPE Court-involved families, including but not limited to:
 - a. Supervised and supported family time services for infants and toddlers;
 - b. Access to child-friendly, trauma-informed visitation spaces within community settings;

- c. Expanded evening and weekend visitation hours in locations accessible by public transportation;
 - d. Transportation assistance, including rideshare vouchers, gas cards, and public transportation credit;
 - e. Workforce capacity building for family time supervisors trained in infant-parent attachment and early childhood development who can provide real-time coaching during visits;
 - f. Joint caregiver-parent training on trauma-informed care, developmental milestones, and communication strategies to reduce conflict and improve reunification outcomes;
 - g. Provide caregiving essentials and culturally appropriate books available in multiple languages; and
 - h. Implement tools to support communication and celebrate developmental milestones.
3. Direct the Director of DCFS to report back to the Board in writing at or before recommended budget with a plan to leverage existing FFPSA and potential Flexible Family Support funds to implement the strategy proposed in directive #2 within existing resources.
4. Direct the Acting CEO to convene an interdepartmental HOPE Court Support Workgroup, including but not limited to DCFS, Department of Mental Health, Department of Public Social Services, Department of Economic Opportunity, County Counsel, Los Angeles Dependency Lawyers, Children's Law Center, First 5 LA, and the Department of Health Services Court Pediatrician Program, and invite the Court's participation in the workgroup, to:
 - a. Develop a coordinated approach to support the HOPE Court model;
 - b. Build data and evaluation systems to monitor outcomes;
 - c. Align staffing, funding, data sharing, and service delivery across departments; and identify opportunities to braid FFPSA, Flexible Family Support, prevention, and early childhood funding; and

- d. Identify additional areas in the County where County departments and partner agencies could dedicate resources to support replication or expansion of the HOPE Court model.

The Workgroup shall report back to the Board in writing in 90 days with recommendations, resource needs, proposed next steps, and milestones.

- 5. Instruct all County department heads participating in HOPE Court implementation and support to center racial equity, family voice, and community partnership in program design and delivery, and to track outcomes disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, and Supervisorial District to ensure equitable access and impact.
- 6. Direct the Director of DCFS, in partnership with the Court, to strengthen and standardize implementation of the HOPE Court Team approach, including:
 - a. Training for attorneys, social workers, and service providers on infant mental health, early attachment, and trauma-informed practices;
 - b. Embedding multidisciplinary team staffing and case consultation models;
 - c. Ensuring frequent, meaningful parent-child visitation as a core practice expectation; and
 - d. Establishing shared outcome measures focused on child safety, family stability, timely reunification, and prevention of re-entry into care.

Departments shall identify existing resources and partnership opportunities to support implementation without disrupting current HOPE Court operations, and DCFS shall report back on progress within 120 days.

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