

Fact Sheet: Reforming Child Welfare in Los Angeles County to Better Support Families in Need

Over the last two decades, child welfare in Los Angeles County has experienced a dramatic transformation due to policy changes and the adoption of evidence-based practices that enhance child safety and family outcomes. These changes include significant milestones, such as a substantial reduction in reliance on congregate care facilities for foster placements and an increase in home-based options for children and youth to help keep families together. A combination of federal, state, county, litigation and advocate-led initiatives has driven these developments. Below is a summary of the efforts that have led to the most significant changes, although this list is not exhaustive.

Reducing Congregate Care Placements and Improving Mental Health Service Access

- [Shift to Short-term Residential Therapeutic Programs \(STRTP\)](#): Short-term, 24-hour care and supervision of children and non-minor dependents in a specialized and intensive environment, focusing on services, support and treatment with state and federal staffing mandates and strict licensing standards.
- New Determination Process for STRTP Placements: Federal policy changes dictate that only a qualified individual (mental health worker) must complete an assessment to determine if a youth in foster care needs to be placed in a congregate care setting, i.e., STRTP.
 - A dependency court judge must issue an order based on the assessment and recommendation from the mental health worker, including the necessary regular interval review to ensure the youth does not remain in the restrictive placement longer than necessary.
- [Home-based Wraparound Mental Health Services](#): As part of the Katie A. settlement, children and youth in foster care at risk of a more restrictive and intensive residential placement receive access to mental health care through wraparound services, including intensive home-based services and care coordination. Wraparound is a team-based, collaborative process for helping children and youth with special mental health needs. Families learn to identify and use their strengths and community resources to address their individual needs. As of Jan. 1, 2025, Wraparound is a designated Aftercare program for children and youth exiting from STRTP to a family-based setting.
- [Prioritizing Kinship/Relative Care](#): DCFS searches for relatives and close friends when children and youth must enter foster care due to safety concerns in the home. Providing supportive resources that help children remain with kin reduces the number of times a child is moved while parents work towards reunification.

Increased Support for Youth, Parents and Caregivers

- Trauma-Informed Care: DCFS ensures that all services provided to children and youth are trauma-informed, recognizing the profound impact of abuse on mental and emotional health.

- Legal Representation: All children and youth in foster care are given a court-appointed attorney to represent their interests through the [Children's Law Center of California](#). The attorney for the child or youth is provided at no cost to them/their family.
- Parents in Partnership (PIP) Program: PIPs, as they are commonly known, are mothers and fathers who have successfully navigated the child welfare system and reunified with their children. As PIPs, these parents are full-time DCFS employees who provide information and guidance to others who have temporarily or permanently lost custody of their children.
- [Foster Youth Bill of Rights](#): The creation of the county's first Foster Youth Bill of Rights and the corresponding educational campaign launched in 2019 to ensure all children and youth in foster care are aware of their legal rights to safe and stable placements, education, tangible resources and more.
- [Creation of the Ombudsman Office](#): The LA County Ombudsman for Youth was established to assist, support and advocate for youth in STRTPs based on their identified concerns or needs.
- Increased coordination with the county Department of Mental Health (DMH) to better meet families' needs.
 - [Family Preservation](#): This program exists to strengthen and preserve families who are at risk or already experiencing difficulties with family functioning. The goal is to ensure children's emotional, social, educational, cultural, and spiritual development in a safe and caring environment. It offers families a range of outpatient mental health services – in office, at home or school – intended to alleviate mental health symptoms and improve family, school, and community interactions.
 - [Specialized Foster Care \(SFC\) Mental Health Services Program](#): SFC ensures that children receive timely and appropriate mental health services. The program consists of co-located county DMH program managers, clinical supervisors, psychologists, psychiatric social workers and case managers within DCFS offices countywide. SFC staff screen and evaluate referred DCFS children/youth to link them to community-based mental health and other service providers.
 - [Intensive Services Foster Care Program](#): A collaboration that includes the Department of Probation to provide intensive care in community settings for youth with serious emotional and behavioral challenges through specially trained Foster Family Agency teams and foster parents. Services are tailored to meet the underlying needs of the child/youth and their family. These youth are often involved with child welfare and juvenile justice (known as “cross over youth”).
- Boosted Support for Kin/Relative Caregivers
 - DCFS increased the financial assistance provided to relative caregivers to better align with the needs of children in foster care. This includes raising monthly payments to cover a child's basic living expenses and providing financial

- assistance to relative caregivers who become legal guardians of youth in foster care ([Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program](#)).
- [Kinship Support Services Program \(KSSP\)](#): A statewide effort to provide services and resources to relative caregivers, including counseling, training, respite care, and assistance navigating the foster care system to support and maintain relative placements.
- **Free Cell Phone Access for Youth**: If a youth in foster care does not have access to a cell phone, a social worker can secure one free of charge. All youth have the right at any time to call or contact their lawyer, social worker or probation officer, Court Appointed Special Advocate, family members, the Ombudsman for Youth's office and Community Care Licensing.
- [New Website with Resources](#): In 2018, DCFS launched a new department website to enhance transparency and help parents, youth, and caregivers more easily access critical information when involved in child welfare. Youth in foster care can use the Benefits Eligibility Finder to find resources to meet their individual needs.
- [Launch of Cal-FURS](#): A statewide hotline with local mobile response teams to provide immediate trauma-informed support to current and former foster youth and their caregivers.
- [Creation of the LA County Youth Commission](#): The county's first commission, comprised of youth with firsthand experience in child welfare and/or probation, helps guide and inform the development of youth-focused policies across departments.

Strengthening Child Safety Practice

- [Child and Family Team Meetings](#): An integrated mental health model that centers on the voices of families and encourages collaboration among the social worker, parents or caregivers, child and mental health practitioners. This approach focuses on identifying the family's strengths and underlying needs.
- [Core Practice Model](#): An innovative way of working with families by approaching their needs as a supportive team to identify their strengths and underlying needs, reducing unnecessary removals of children from the home.
- **Multidisciplinary Assessment Teams (MAT)**: When a child is newly detained or is involved in a Voluntary Family Maintenance case, is between the ages of 0 to 5, and is placed in the home with a parent, they may be eligible to receive a MAT. This assessment is meant to help families meet the needs of their child(ren) to decrease the likelihood of a lengthy separation. The information gathered is used to determine what interventions and services are most needed by the child(ren), which also helps determine the best living arrangements for the child(ren).
- **Instituting Continuous Quality Improvement**: Development of an internal team to help identify concerns early and change department policies and practices that improve family outcomes.

- [Creation of the Office of Equity](#): A specialized division responsible for providing centralized oversight and direction of equitable policies, practices, programs and services that better meet the needs of families from historically excluded communities. The office also seeks to reduce disproportionality within Los Angeles County's child welfare system.
- Specialized Training for Mandated Reporters: DCFS provides in-depth training for educators, social workers and healthcare providers on recognizing and reporting signs of abuse, emphasizing the importance of accurate and timely reporting to protect children.
- [Accountability Hotline for Social Workers](#): Any social worker in California can report concerns about county child welfare agency practices, policies or procedures that endanger children's health, safety or well-being by calling the toll-free Social Worker Empowerment Hotline at 1-844-796-6283.
- Out of Home Care Investigation Section (OHCIS): OHCIS conducts additional investigations to assess whether foster, group or STRTP homes that have received emergency response referrals remain suitable as placement resources for children and youth. OHCIS places an investigative hold on a home when a child has been removed from the foster home due to an allegation of abuse, neglect or exploitation within that home. OHCIS decides when to lift the hold.

Integrating Technology to Enhance Child Safety and Investigations of Abuse

- Criminal Clearance Tracking System: A system that enables social workers in the field to use mobile devices to immediately access basic criminal history data in abuse or neglect cases they are investigating.
- [Risk Stratification](#): A data-driven management tool that assists social workers in serving and supporting families according to their level of need.
- [Structured Decision-Making](#): Known as SDM, this computer-based program is one of the tools used by social workers investigating allegations of abuse or neglect to help them assess whether and to what extent children are at risk of maltreatment. SDM classifies a family's risk level as very high, high, moderate or low and is one piece of information used by the social worker to guide the next steps in their response to the referral.
- [Emergency Response Investigation Service \(ERIS\)](#): Sponsored by the County Office of Child Protection, ERIS provides emergency referral social workers, dependency investigators and children's social workers with real-time access to critical information on adults living in the home being investigated for suspected abuse or neglect, enhancing their ability to assess risk to the children along with the potential viability of relative placements instead of foster care, and to assess their own personal safety for conducting the investigation if adults in the home have a violent criminal history. ERIS includes information from other County departments such as Department of Health Services, Department of Mental Health and law enforcement.
- Family and Children's Index: A computer-based system that centralizes an interagency database designed to facilitate the identification of children and families who are at risk

of child abuse and neglect and who have had relevant contacts with other county agencies.

Changes to Strengthen Social Work

- **Required CSEC Training:** All county employees must complete training on Commercial Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) to better understand the individuals at risk, the impacts of CSEC and the requirements for mandated reporters.
- **Cultural Competency Training:** DCFS equips child welfare staff with cultural sensitivity training to understand and respect the diverse backgrounds of children and families in Los Angeles County, thereby improving communication and trust.
- **Enhanced Collaboration with Law Enforcement:** Countywide cross-training was implemented to help social workers and law enforcement officers identify signs of abuse from maltreatment, neglect or accidents and identify when they should take children for medical exams at the county's medical hubs or other hospitals. Additionally, DCFS social workers are now co-located in several LA County Sheriff's patrol stations to build our relationships with law enforcement further and collaborate in connecting families to critical resources.
- **Better Abuse and Neglect Investigations:** Strengthening social workers' practice has included specialized training for them to assist in their investigations, including how to interview witnesses, when to use forensic exams and how to handle a child's recanted allegations of abuse or neglect.
- **More Training for Social Workers:** DCFS developed an in-house training academy that all newly hired social workers must complete. Using a peer cohort model, the academy combines classroom learning and other experiential approaches. Social workers engage in role-playing through simulation labs based on real, previous DCFS abuse/neglect investigations.
- **Increased Staffing and Reduced Caseloads:** Increased staffing ratios have reduced caseloads for social workers, allowing them to spend more time with families, particularly those with the most complex dynamics and needs.

Helping Families Reduce Involvement with Child Welfare

- **[Hotline to Helpline:](#)** This program diverts families whose circumstances do not meet the legal threshold for neglect or abuse to a helpline that connects them to community resources, including food banks and housing and employment assistance before issues become unmanageable.
- **[Investing in Prevention Services:](#)** Developed the first countywide prevention plan that engages the community in upfront, [primary prevention efforts](#) to strengthen families and keep them from being referred to and involved with child welfare.
- **[Cultural Brokers:](#)** Established in 2008, the Community Cultural Broker Program provides Black/African American families with a community volunteer to help them navigate the

child welfare system and minimize cultural misinterpretations between them and DCFS. Cultural brokers have significantly reduced unnecessary involvement with DCFS, supporting the department's efforts to tackle the disproportionate representation of Black/African American children and youth in child welfare.

- Increased Collaboration with Community Partners: DCFS has paved the way for an overhaul of child abuse prevention services so that all families have access to culturally relevant and unique social services within their communities. This is possible through partnerships with philanthropic, community and faith-based organizations and county and state government agencies with shared interests.