



# CULTIVATING HOPE THROUGH ACTION:

How Public-Private Partnerships Are Strengthening  
Child and Family Well-Being in L.A. County

THE  
RALPH M. PARSONS  
FOUNDATION

Center for  
Strategic  
Partnerships



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# INTRODUCTION



**“Authentic collaboration takes time, heroes and trust. By working together, L.A.’s private and public sector partners can address our County’s most intractable problems. When it comes to catalyzing change, our collective value is so much greater than the sum of our individual parts.”**

— WENDY GAREN, PRESIDENT AND CEO,  
THE RALPH M. PARSONS FOUNDATION

Government and philanthropy often share common goals and a capacity to enable widescale systems change. Yet, the two sectors can have vastly different mandates and accountability structures, and at times they even seem to speak different languages. At their best, when they work together, they make ideal partners—philanthropy contributing nimbleness and a spirit of experimentation, while government commands the resources to sustain what works.

In Los Angeles County, consistent and growing collaboration between government and philanthropy has fueled the County’s ability to test new ideas, assess their effectiveness, and bring them to scale in ways that have had a significant impact on child welfare reform.

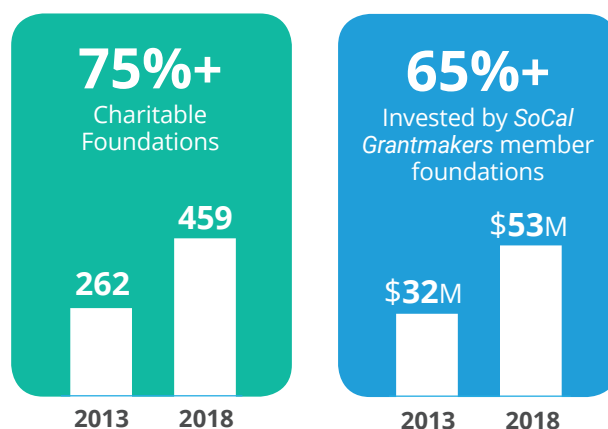
A clear example came in the dark early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when public and private partners quickly mobilized to provide critical resources: increasing the supply of personal protective equipment for child protection caseworkers, connecting foster families with tools to support distance learning, and ensuring families in the hardest-hit communities had access to food, diapers, and other essential items.

Had the pandemic hit seven years earlier, the response in L.A. County would likely have looked very different. At that point, child- and family-serving County departments operated largely in silos, lacking the information-sharing, joint planning, and funding mechanisms that would enable them to work together on behalf of their mutual clients. Engagement with philanthropic, community, and faith-based organizations was spotty at best. Despite the sincere desires of many within both County government and philanthropy to help children and families, the mutual understanding, trust, and infrastructure simply did not exist to work together effectively.

A turning point came in 2013, when the tragic headline-grabbing murder of an 8-year-old L.A. County boy ignited intense scrutiny of the County’s efforts to protect children and elevate their well-being. An ad hoc commission empaneled to examine the system’s failures revealed yawning service gaps.

L.A.’s key stakeholders could have shrugged at yet another list of recommendations. Instead, the 2014 Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection’s final report sparked a countywide reckoning and acknowledgement that improving the lives of vulnerable children would require coordinated action. In the years since, child- and family-serving public agencies have systematically broken down the walls of their respective silos. Philanthropy has nearly doubled its investment in L.A.’s child welfare system, serving as the catalyst for collaborations spanning public and private agencies and helping myriad community and faith-based efforts take root and thrive. And the County’s families are better for it.

GROWTH OF PHILANTHROPIC INVESTMENT  
IN L.A. COUNTY’S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM





Public-private collaboration has sped efforts to ensure that there are enough relative caregivers and foster parents for those children who do enter foster care. Today, the largest locally administered child welfare system in the world—L.A. County’s Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)—places children with relatives (the gold standard for placement) at some of the highest rates in the nation. And thanks to statewide legislation bolstered by a collaborative pilot project that gave L.A. foster parents priority access to trauma-informed child care, the County now draws down more than \$25 million<sup>i</sup> in annual funds to provide this critical support for young foster children and their caregivers.

In addition, multiple County departments—including DCFS and the Departments of Mental Health (DMH) and Public Health (DPH)—are working together to increase support for families long before they reach a crisis, so that more children can remain safely at home. L.A.’s first-ever countywide prevention plan now guides many of these efforts, and multiple County departments have convened to develop metrics to track them. DMH committed millions of dollars in state funding to bolster and expand some of the County’s most effective prevention efforts,

including a 2-year, \$40 million investment in evidence-based home visiting services. Meanwhile, awareness of racial disproportionality and the need for greater equity undergirds an unprecedented commitment to create space for the voices of people who have personal experience with public systems, L.A.’s most vulnerable children and families, and those who know them best.

Although this story is book-ended by crises—a tragic child death and a global pandemic—it is not defined by these events. On the contrary, this is the story of a county, riven by challenges, coming together to bring a renewed sense of hope to its child welfare agency and the families it serves. Together, public and private partners are not only seeking better ways to improve the experience of children affected by the foster care system but taking proactive steps to provide the services and supports that all families need to stay together, reunify, and thrive.

As communities across the country emerge from the COVID-19 crises, the solutions found in L.A. can serve as a beacon for how to build a cross-sector network to achieve collective impact for the benefit of children, youth, and families too often underserved by public and private systems.

## CREATING INFRASTRUCTURE FOR CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

**There was a huge push from the community, the press, and the Blue Ribbon Commission—all in the same boat, rowing in the same direction—which made the Commission’s recommendations impossible to ignore. It was an extraordinary coming together.**

— AILEEN ADAMS, CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON CHILD PROTECTION



Although the L.A. County Board of Supervisors created the Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection with a focus on DCFS, the 2014 Commission report implicated the County as a whole in its failures: “The greatest obstacle to reform is the County system itself. Key entities too often operate in silos, rather than as an integrated network with a shared commitment and vision.”<sup>ii</sup>

At the time, the child welfare system was not only reeling from a shocking child death but had endured years of rapid turnover in leadership. No countywide mission statement, strategic plan, or metrics existed to guide the

priorities of child- and family-serving departments and help them leverage available resources for maximum benefit. Externally, engagement and partnerships with community-based organizations had diminished significantly, such that the Commission noted, “The community perceives it no longer has a voice in DCFS’s strategic planning process. Instead, decisions are made and implemented without the community’s knowledge or input.” The Commission’s report called for urgent, meaningful change.

## Clarion Call for Philanthropic Engagement

May 12, 2014, was pivotal. That's the day Southern California Grantmakers (SCG) Executive Director Christine (Chris) Essel invited Blue Ribbon Commission Chairman David Sanders and Co-Executive Director Aileen Adams to speak to a group of local philanthropic leaders about how they could become more deeply involved in child welfare reform.

The Commission's recommendations were clear about the critical role philanthropy had to play in ameliorating the system. "The power of public-private partnerships has been under-utilized by the County to date and should be an important strategy for improving services," the commissioners wrote.<sup>iii</sup>

Essel also saw an opportunity to engage philanthropy in the sweeping reforms urged by the Commission. As a former senior executive for government affairs at Paramount Pictures and CEO of the L.A. Community Redevelopment Agency, Essel brought extensive political and leadership experience to the mission. Then-SCG board chair and current Ralph M. Parsons Foundation CEO Wendy Garen explains, "[Essel] came in with a public policy lens and believed that our organization [SCG] could be much more potent in helping people."

The SCG gathering on May 12 ran longer than expected due to the enthusiastic engagement of participants, Adams recalls. After a robust exchange, Garen rose to thank the presenters and pose a provocative question: "Should we consider a call to action?"

Many agreed, indelibly changing philanthropy's role in L.A.'s massive child reform effort. SCG drafted a letter to the Board of Supervisors, urging the Board to act on the Commission's recommendations. A group of 17 foundation leaders ultimately co-signed the letter; a smaller group also testified at the Board hearing about the issue. The Board voted 4-1 in support of the Commission's report on June 10, just five days after the letter was sent.

"It was a radical, revolutionary sort of moment," Garen says. Energized by their success, the funders were determined to continue learning and working together. Shortly after the May 2014 gathering, SCG's Child Welfare Funders Collaborative (recently renamed the Child and Family Well-Being Funders Collaborative) was launched.

Over the years, this body has effectively served its purpose of creating a space to focus on policy reform and explore opportunities for private support of DCFS projects.

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**"We created the Child Welfare Funders Collaborative in the spirit of bringing together all L.A. funders concerned with child and family well-being. It makes sense to work collectively to support collaboration between the County and the community."**

— WINNIE WECHSLER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
ANTHONY & JEANNE PRITZKER FAMILY  
FOUNDATION/PRITZKER FOSTER CARE INITIATIVE

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## Office of Child Protection

Establishment of a single entity with "authority to coordinate, plan, and implement one unified child protection system" was central to the Blue Ribbon Commission's recommendations. In response, the L.A. County Board of Supervisors and CEO created the Office of Child Protection (OCP) in February 2015.

Instead of a child protection czar imbued with the power to fire staff and amend County department budgets as originally conceived, the new office's authority hinged on its ability to bring stakeholders together and influence collaboration. While many at the time feared this approach would impede the office's efficacy, it has proven important in forging the cross-sector collaboration that has been at the heart of L.A.'s child welfare reform effort since then.



Fesia Davenport, a former Chief Deputy Director of DCFS (and today the County's CEO), was appointed to serve as OCP's interim director while a nationwide search was conducted. Davenport approached the role with care, focusing on creating a broad sense of ownership across County leadership and engaging foundation leaders and community stakeholders as critical partners. In a [March 2015 interview in \*The Imprint\*](#), she observed, "Operating in an authoritative manner might get you compliance, but it won't necessarily get you buy-in or ownership. What we're looking for is ... something that's sustainable."

The centerpiece of Davenport's tenure was creating a countywide mission statement on child safety: "Protect our children, support our families and champion their success."<sup>iv</sup> For the first time, the County's mission explicitly encompassed child safety and well-being, compelling all department heads to make this their goal.

Davenport also conducted a series of convenings and focus groups in preparation for drafting the office's first strategic plan. In total, OCP consulted more than 500 stakeholders, ranging from foundation CEOs and County department heads to grassroots advocates, caregivers, and foster youth. In this way, OCP followed both the process and recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission, which highlighted the importance of listening to people who had personal experience with the child welfare system.

In the midst of this planning process, the Board announced its selection of Judge Michael Nash as OCP's first director. Nash, who had served 16 years as presiding judge of the County's enormous juvenile court system, took the helm on January 1, 2016. Like Davenport, Nash placed a high value on creating a climate of cooperation and forging strong working partnerships with department heads. "We don't tell anybody what to do. We all work together," Nash says.

His early months were spent finishing the strategic plan and vetting it with 16 different County departments and stakeholders, including First 5 LA, SCG, the juvenile court, the County Commission for Children and Families, and more. The [finished strategic plan](#), submitted to the Board in October 2016, established broad goals around prevention, child safety, permanency, and well-being—all hinging on strong collaboration.

Less than a year later, in June 2017, OCP released a [countywide prevention plan](#), as called for in the Blue Ribbon Commission report. *Paving the Road to Safety for Our Children* established an emphasis on primary and secondary prevention activities—supports provided to families with or without any identified risk factors, prior to any contact with the child welfare system. These included support for concrete needs, opportunities for social connection, economic security, and more.



In an unprecedented display of **cross-agency collaboration**, **10 County departments came together** to help implement the countywide prevention plan, resulting in common goals, shared metrics, cross-departmental strategies, and expanded networks of prevention services.

#### The Los Angeles County Departments included:

- Children and Family Services
- Library
- Mental Health
- Parks and Recreation
- Public Health
- Probation
- Public Social Services
- Workforce Development, Aging and Community
- Health Services
- Child Support

*"Collaboration is like a garden. When you first plan a garden, you plant three little plants, and they're all two feet apart. But over time, they grow deeper roots, and they grow toward each other. Eventually the blank space disappears, and it just looks like a single plant. I can only imagine that the public-private partnerships within L.A. County will continue to grow in this way, organically deeper and stronger."*

— FESIA DAVENPORT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, L.A. COUNTY





# Center for Strategic Public-Private Partnerships

Despite growing mutual interest in collaboration on the part of both the County and philanthropy, it was clear that this work would require dedicated backbone support. County staff were largely unacquainted with key players in the philanthropic world, and the daily pressure to address citizens' urgent, immediate needs leaves little time for exploration. Foundation staff possess ample resources and good intentions, but they needed help navigating the County's complex organizational and fiscal environment.

Shortly after assuming her role as acting executive director of OCP in early 2015, Davenport engaged a small group of key players in discussions about how to create a more formal liaison between the County and philanthropy that could broker more strategic collaborations. The group included Essel, Garen, and Adams, as well as Torie Osborn, now Senior Strategist for L.A. County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, and Fred Ali, then-President and CEO of the Weingart Foundation. The latter two had been instrumental in the creation of the former City of Los Angeles Office of Strategic Partnerships under Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa in 2009.

From this think tank emerged a motion, authored by Supervisors Hilda Solis and Sheila Kuehl and approved by the Board of Supervisors in October 2015, instructing the CEO to establish the Center for Strategic Public-Private Partnerships and hire a director.<sup>v</sup> The Center's first organizational home was within OCP, and it was funded equally by the County and private philanthropy—initially a group of 12 foundations, many of whom were members of SCG's Child Welfare Funders Collaborative. SCG also provided fiscal and contracts support and funded a systems change consultant with extensive

experience in County administration, Gita Murthy, to help lay critical groundwork for the Center while a search for the director was conducted. There was little time to waste—the Center was established as a pilot project with three short years to prove its value.

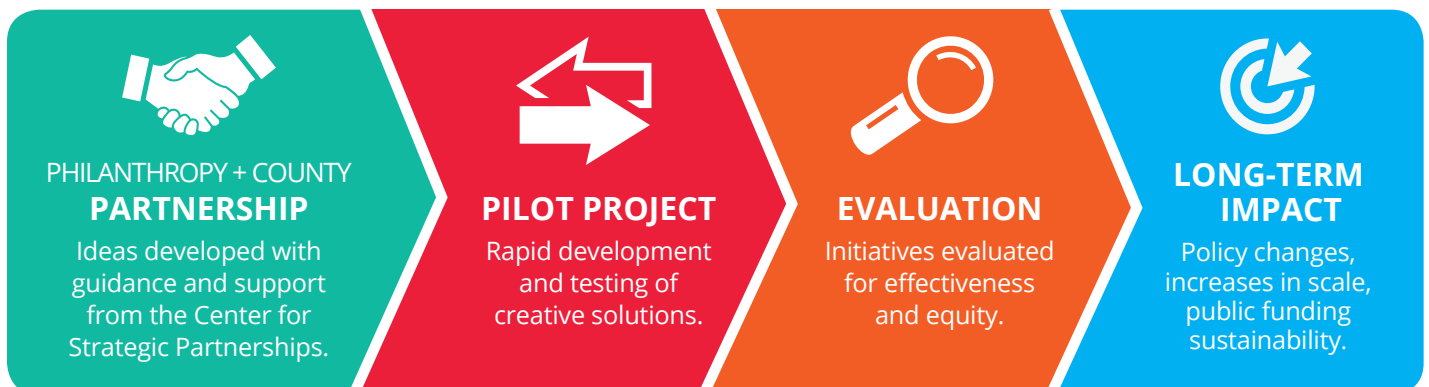
Kate Anderson became the Center's first director in April 2016. Anderson's prior experience included serving on the staff of members of Congress, working as a private sector attorney, and directing the L.A. Office of Children Now, a statewide advocacy organization. Her rich combination of public, private, and nonprofit experience helped Anderson quickly build trust among her two primary groups of stakeholders.

The Center's agenda initially focused on three priority areas where local foundations' interests aligned most closely with OCP's goals and priorities: preventing children from entering the child protection system, recruiting and retaining foster families for children in care, and supporting transition-age youth moving from foster care to independent adulthood.

In its first year, the Center engaged in 21 joint initiatives with 22 public and private partners. This work represented more than \$500,000 in private sector investments in the County child welfare system. Early pilot projects provided proof of concept for the Center and demonstrated the power of garnering private investment to speed the development and testing of innovative ideas which, once proven effective, could be brought to scale and/or sustained with public funding.

Encouraged by the Center's early success, the County CEO recommended that it be moved to a new permanent home within the CEO's office, with an expanded scope that spanned not just child protection but all Board-directed priorities.<sup>vi</sup>

**The most effective public-private initiatives bring the best thinking of government, foundation, and community leaders to bear on the system's most persistent problems.**



## TRAUMA-INFORMED CHILD CARE FOR FOSTER FAMILIES

For some working adults, concerns about the availability of affordable, appropriate child care may be the only thing standing in the way of saying “yes” to becoming a foster parent for a young child. Center for Strategic Partnerships staff helped DCFS and a small group of funders negotiate the terms of a pilot project that provided emergency access to trauma-informed child care for foster children.

**The pilot project and its evaluation provided proof of concept that helped secure \$27M in new child care funding for L.A. County.**



The Center & DCFS helped **secure funding** for urgent child-care needs for foster children.



Pilot program for **emergency access to trauma-informed child care.**



The pilot program was a success, leading to the **authorization of state funding.**



In FY 2019-20, the state allocated **\$71M to the program** (38% in L.A. County).<sup>vii</sup>

The new iteration of the Center, now known as the Center for Strategic Partnerships, preserves the joint funding model, with the County (now represented by seven departments that serve children and families) and philanthropy splitting the cost evenly through a continued operating agreement with SCG.

“By leveraging County resources and the generous contributions of the philanthropic community, we can collaboratively provide the most vulnerable populations with the assistance they need to not only survive, but thrive,” Supervisor Hilda Solis said in an accompanying press release.<sup>viii</sup>

**“We are not going to be the gatekeeper of public-private partnerships. If we were to be a funnel, we would be limiting the potential for growth. We will foster the will to create public-private partnerships, and we will help to build them when we can, but if partners are engaging in initiatives beyond that and outside of us, more power to them. I truly believe that we get better outcomes this way.”**

— KATE ANDERSON, DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Although the changes broadened the Center’s scope, stakeholders agreed that the well-being of children, youth, and families would remain a central focus. Child welfare-related projects remain a high priority, joined by the related areas of youth development and empowerment, health equity, and economic security.

Initiatives that the Center agrees to take on keep children and families at the center and focus on transforming systems and securing anti-racist policies. In addition to supporting cross-sector collaborations that address these priorities, the Center is charged with fostering a culture of collaboration more broadly, both within the County and externally, through relationship-building, education, and technical assistance.

### The Center for Strategic Partnerships

has helped secure **\$23.5M** in funding and the formation of **50 joint initiatives** among **55 public & private partners** since its inception.





## PREVENTIVE HOME VISITING SERVICES

Supportive home visits after the birth of a child create a research-proven opportunity to improve child and family well-being. In 2016, the Center for Strategic Partnerships provided backbone support for a pilot partnership among the County's Department of Public Social Services (DPSS), First 5 LA, OCP, the Children's Data Network, and SHIELDS for Families to expand access to home visiting for parents who were eligible for DPSS services in some of South L.A.'s most underserved neighborhoods. Using data from this pilot, DPSS and community partners then successfully advocated for the inclusion of new funds in the state budget for home visiting for TANF recipients—expanding access to this important service not only in L.A. County but statewide.



CSP supported a **pilot partnership** among County stakeholders.



Pilot program funded by First 5 LA expanded access to home visiting.



Reissa Foundation funded an implementation guide.



In FY 2020-21, California allocated **\$84M** for home visiting for TANF recipients statewide.<sup>ix</sup>

## STRENGTHENING OUT-OF-HOME CARE



Let's get serious about including as many people as possible in solving the problem of finding homes for children in foster care and finding creative ways to support vulnerable children and families. Let's not be beholden to the way things have always been done, just for tradition's sake.

— GEREY DIXON, LEAD PASTOR, CENTER OF HOPE LOS ANGELES

Between 2005 and 2015, the County's number of available foster parents dropped by more than half, from nearly 8,000 to 4,000. During that period, the number of children and youth in foster care grew to nearly 18,000.<sup>x</sup> The system was in crisis. As a result, the Blue Ribbon Commission report noted, "many children were placed in homes far away from their schools, friends, and communities. DCFS social workers often struggled to find suitable homes, forcing them to keep children, sometimes only days old, at DCFS offices or temporary shelters for extended periods. The shortage of homes adds to the number of placements children experience, contributes to the dislocation and instability they feel, separates siblings, and increases the workload of social workers."<sup>xi</sup>

This crisis was expected to be exacerbated by the state's plan for Continuum of Care Reform, also released in 2014. This plan required all California counties to move even more children and youth from congregate care settings, mainly group homes, to family homes. Leaders in both County government and philanthropy recognized the urgency of addressing this shortage.

## Increasing Placements with Relatives for Children and Youth in Care

One of the earliest collaborative projects to draw on the new supports available from OCP and the Center for Strategic Partnerships focused on increasing the engagement of family members with youth in the County's care.

Evidence strongly supports that children placed in foster care fare better when placed with family members than in nonrelative foster or group homes. However, kin are not always notified that a child is involved with the system—and when they are, they sometimes experience a lack of communication, interest, or support from social workers and other system representatives. The topic of kinship care was an important one for the Blue Ribbon Commission, which based its recommendations in part on the findings of focus groups and interviews with kinship caregivers.<sup>xii</sup>

## Family Engagement Project

% of children placed with kin as their first placement in participating DCFS offices

80%

L.A. County Pilot

vs.

33%

National Average



In May 2016, in a motion co-authored by Supervisors Kuehl and Solis, the Board of Supervisors called on DCFS and Probation—both of which place system-involved youth in family homes—to work with OCP and the courts to build a robust and coordinated system for finding family members when a youth is first taken into County custody.<sup>xiii</sup> The team designed a pilot project to substantially increase the number of identified family supports for each child upon entry. The pilot, dubbed Upfront Family Finding, began in October 2016 in two DCFS offices, one juvenile hall, and one residential treatment camp.

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**“The Upfront Family Finding pilot is one of the most successful programs in the Los Angeles County child welfare system. Upfront Family Finding places an emphasis on locating family members at the moment a child welfare case is opened, prior to a child being placed in foster care. Since 2016, this effective program has placed children with their families more than 75 percent of the time. The success of this national model is due in large part to the strength of the partnership among DCFS, OCP, philanthropy, and the Center for Strategic Partnerships.”**

— LISA PINTO, CHILD WELFARE DEPUTY FOR L.A. COUNTY SUPERVISOR SHEILA KUEHL

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Both departments already had specialized staff trained to do family finding work. Prior to 2016, however, DCFS invested most of these efforts on behalf of youth who

had already been placed in foster care with nonrelatives, often for long periods. The pilot program changed that, requiring cases to be assigned to family finding staff right away. In addition, the importance of family engagement was emphasized to all staff in the pilot offices.

The Center for Strategic Partnerships was instrumental in connecting OCP with financial support from The Ahmanson Foundation. Center staff also conducted an extensive search for experts to provide technical support. With Ahmanson’s funding, the team ultimately engaged Child Trends, a nationally recognized research organization focused on improving the lives of children, to evaluate the project’s success in the two DCFS pilot offices. Child Trend’s evaluation found that the majority of children served had relatives who were interested in forging a connection: 60 percent had at least one relative interested in providing a placement, and approximately 80 percent had at least one relative interested in visits or phone calls.<sup>xiv</sup>

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**“Some of the [foster] homes, they are already overwhelmed. They are meeting their concrete needs, but are they really meeting what the children need? I make sure my grandchildren have everything.”**

— KINSHIP CAREGIVER, BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION’S FINAL REPORT

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Since then, the program has been expanded to 11 DCFS offices. In the past five years, more than 10,000 children have been the subject of detention hearings in those offices, and more than 80 percent of those children have been placed with kin (nonoffending parents, relatives, or extended family members) as their first placement. This level of placement with relatives rivals the best child welfare systems in the nation.

A plan is now in the works to extend the project to all 20 DCFS offices. Child Trends has completed two evaluations of the program, including one taking a longitudinal approach.

## Shining a Spotlight on Foster Parent Recruitment

A 2016 analysis by DCFS showed that the foster care shortage was most acute in areas with large concentrations of families of color—such as South L.A.—where the highest numbers of children were entering foster care.<sup>xv</sup> Black children make up less than one-tenth of the child population in L.A. County, but they represent more than a quarter of the children in foster care.<sup>xvi</sup>

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**“If we want to create one system, a unified, family-centric system, we have to be willing to step out of our individual boxes and collaborate for the collective good and better outcomes for families.”**

— GITA MURTHY, FOUNDER AND CEO, GITA MURTHY CONSULTING AND EXECUTIVE CONSULTANT, DMH-UCLA STRIKE TEAM

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While tackling this disproportionate rate of removals requires urgent attention, the young people entering care also need more nonrelative caregivers from their own neighborhoods to help them stay connected to their families, schools, and culture when family placement is not an option.

In the spring of 2017, Center for Strategic Partnerships consultant and former County insider Gita Murthy had an idea about how to address the shortage of foster homes in South L.A.: create a “one-stop-shop” where potential caregivers could learn more about the child welfare system, apply to become foster parents, and get started on licensing on the spot. The idea came to her during a meeting with Center director Kate Anderson and DCFS representatives.

The team hypothesized that making the complex application process easier for families by bringing more information and screenings onsite could encourage more families to apply, in the same way that one-day health fairs bring critical services to people who might not otherwise receive them. But they knew they were going to need partners to help bring the idea to life. They floated the concept to a few key philanthropic leaders, including Wendy Garen of The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation and Winnie Wechsler of the Anthony & Jeanne Pritzker Family Foundation and the Pritzker Foster Care Initiative.

Philanthropic and community partners worked with Center Associate Director Elizabeth Cohen to secure big-ticket items, including a mobile health van, and foundations contributed seed money to get the project off the ground. Knowing that the faith community was a tremendous resource, the Center also identified a faith-based partner in Nancy Harris, who was then running the community development corporation for Holman United Methodist Church, one of several large Black churches in South L.A. with an emphasis on service and justice. “Nancy was all heart, all in,” Murthy recalls, “and very connected.”

While the Center secured additional philanthropic investments and matching dollars from DCFS, Cohen, Harris, and Zahirah Mann of the Parsons Foundation

worked with a steering committee composed of representatives from DCFS, philanthropy, and community-based organizations including RaiseAChild to hone the event’s design and format.

Meanwhile, Harris spent months meeting with fellow faith leaders individually, making direct appeals to congregations, and hosting lunch gatherings for local pastors of all faiths. One of the luncheon attendees was Jeremy Dixon, Lead Pastor at Center of Hope in Inglewood. Pastor Dixon and his wife, Adrienne, were foster parents themselves and felt a deep calling to serve the cause. They readily agreed to open up their church to host the pilot Fostering Home event in June 2017.

“It felt providential,” Pastor Dixon recalls. “We had a personal mission, a personal vision with our church to solve some big problems, at the same time the department seemed to be looking for some creative ways to involve folks like us in these solutions.”

Nearly 150 families attended the event. Many completed critical first steps in the long process of becoming a foster parent: 65 individuals attended an onsite orientation, and 44 families submitted an application that very day.<sup>xvii</sup>

“Right there, the day of the [first Fostering Home] event, I was sitting with some colleagues I’ve known for years in the faith business,” remembers Harris. “We said, ‘Obviously, there’s this tremendous need in our community. This cannot stop, we have to keep pushing this forward.’”

There were some challenges. It is unknown how many of the participating families ultimately became foster parents in the DCFS system. The lacking follow-up and transparency would need to be addressed before future events could achieve more success.

“Sometimes you just have to roll things out,” Murthy says. “This event was an opportunity to learn in real time, and it changed how DCFS approached future recruitment efforts.”

The pilot also forged lasting relationships between DCFS, the private foster family agencies (FFAs) that participated, and the faith community. In Pastor Dixon’s view, it even took steps toward easing some of the community’s wariness of the County agency.

“Knowing that there’s a legitimate partnership between Center of Hope and DCFS helps to broaden people’s perspective on DCFS,” he says. “It gives the agency a heartbeat.”

DCFS and Probation subsequently joined forces to take up the mantle of the Fostering Home model and have since produced a second round of “one-stop” recruitment events.



## STREAMLINING KINSHIP CAREGIVER APPROVALS

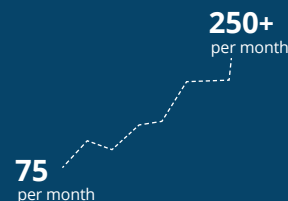
When California's Continuum of Care Reform changed kinship caregiver licensing requirements, it created an almost immediate backlog of family caregivers awaiting approval. A shortage of DCFS staff resources resulted in hardship for some families who found themselves caring for relatives' children for months, or even years, without County financial support.

When former DCFS Director Bobby Cagle arrived in L.A. County in late 2017, his first request to the Center was for help addressing this critical backlog. He had already added staff and identified a nationally recognized consultant, A Second Chance, Inc., whose Gold Standard Process for licensing kin caregivers has helped its jurisdictional partner Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, consistently achieve an impressive 65 percent kin placement rate for children and youth in foster care (compared to approximately one-third nationwide). DCFS could provide about half the funding, Cagle said, but he needed \$400,000 in matching funds to bring help in quickly.

Center director Anderson rallied funders, and A Second Chance provided training, coaching, and technical assistance to streamline the kinship caregiver approval processes for better, faster results. Former Director Cagle made this an "all hands on deck" priority for the department.

THE CENTER WAS ABLE TO QUICKLY COLLABORATE WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS TO ADDRESS FAMILY APPROVAL BACKLOG.

**3X** increase  
in **Family  
Approvals**  
(over 6 months)



### Project funders Included:

- The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation
- The Carl & Roberta Deutsch Foundation
- Weingart Foundation
- Rose Hills Foundation
- Reissa Foundation
- Casey Family Programs

Since 2019, 663 households (more than 1,100 individuals) have attended one of 11 similar events involving 21 FFA partners. More than 250 of those households have moved forward toward foster parent approval. Two community partners, Foster All and RaiseAChild, continue to work with those households to keep them engaged throughout the approval process.<sup>xviii</sup>

## Organizing for Collective Impact

Shortly after the formation of the Center for Strategic Public-Private Partnerships in 2016, The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation President & CEO Wendy Garen approached Anderson with an idea for a collective impact initiative to address the foster parent recruitment and retention crisis. "Parsons doesn't have any real authority," Garen says, "so my approach to this work is to create spaces where other people can step up and engage." She also reached out to colleague John Wagner, Executive Vice President at First 5 LA.

The collective impact group that became known as the Foster Together Network began meeting in April 2017. The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, First 5 LA, the Weingart Foundation, Pritzker Foster Care Initiative, The W. M. Keck Foundation, and Specialty Family Foundation provided early funding support, while the Center brought County leaders to the table, provided the platform to launch, and stayed on as the collective's backbone and a key thought partner. Other early participants included SCG, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Fostering Media Connections, and the Board of Supervisors' deputies responsible for child and family policy.

Early on, the group conducted a landscape analysis of L.A.'s recruitment and retention issues and best practices around the country. Foster Together Network hired Gita Murthy to conduct the study. The hiring of an additional research consultant who had personal experience with the L.A. County foster care system as a youth, Jae Canas, added depth and credibility to the findings. The resulting report highlighted the need for additional recruitment efforts to address racial disproportionality, and it proposed the adoption of three pilot models, the first of which was a coordinated faith-based initiative embedded in communities where disproportionality was high.

Fortuitously, South L.A.'s faith community was already pursuing a collaborative path. Inspired by the success of the first Fostering Home event, six large Black South L.A. churches were working to unite their congregations' efforts to support children and families.

The Center again played a critical role, providing hours of thought partnership and applying on the churches' behalf for support from the Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative, a collaborative effort designed to fund strategic alliances in the nonprofit sector. In March 2019, the faith groups officially became Faith Foster Families Network (3FN), led by Nancy Harris.

In September 2018, a motion arising from conversations in the Foster Together Network's faith-based subcommittee and authored by Supervisors Kathryn Barger and Hilda Solis directed DCFS to work with the Center to build on these budding efforts by creating a countywide faith-based engagement strategy.

## Faith-Based/County Partnerships

have conducted community events to recruit more foster families



**1,100** attendees to date

**35%+** took additional steps toward becoming foster caregivers



Photo courtesy of LAFH

The motion included support for foster family recruitment as well as family visitation centers and monitoring, respite care, cultural brokers, and other services.<sup>xix</sup> The Center recruited philanthropic partners the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Specialty Family Foundation, and The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation to fund consultant support and to participate as stakeholders, alongside a task force of faith leaders. The group identified promising pilot programs and helped establish a centralized Faith-Based Unit within DCFS.<sup>xx</sup>

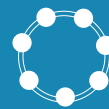
**“There has been plenty of faith-based work that has gone on, good work. But it has happened because somebody in that department had a passion. It hasn’t been the culture of the department. This has to be the culture of the department.”**

— NANCY HARRIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FAITH FOSTER FAMILIES NETWORK

In late 2018, Foster Together Network hired consultants to provide additional backbone support and commissioned a second landscape analysis to assess and inform further coordination between DCFS and the more than 50 independent foster family agencies (FFAs) that recruit and license two-thirds of the County’s nonrelative placements.<sup>xxi</sup> The analysis reconfirmed L.A.’s placement challenges, noting that children and youth in County foster care are placed an average of 22 miles from their parents, with long-distance placements most common for children from South L.A. Long distances between

parents and their children have been shown to decrease family visitation time (which directly impacts family bonding and child well-being) and increase length of time to reunification, in addition to increasing agency costs.<sup>xxii</sup>

In the past three years, the Foster Together Network data workgroup, co-led by Anneli Stone of the W. M. Keck Foundation, DCFS leadership, and experienced systems-change and backbone consultant Rochelle Alley of Big Orange Splot, LLC, has worked shoulder to shoulder with the DCFS data team to design a dashboard that for the first time provides a coordinated, countywide view of where all foster youth are placed (by DCFS and the FFAs), with whom (kin or foster placements), and how far from their families of origin. This is a groundbreaking advancement that will inform more targeted foster family recruitment.



## Foster Together Network (FTN)

includes a wide range of representatives including:

- Philanthropy
- DCFS
- Private foster family agencies
- Community-based organizations
- Faith-based organizations
- Foster and kin caregivers
- Parents and youth with child welfare system experience

## Expanding Impact

2017: Apx. **25** people attended FTN’s first meeting

2020: Nearly **500** people attended FTN’s virtual gathering



Photo courtesy of LAFH

# BUILDING A COUNTYWIDE PREVENTION AND CHILD WELL-BEING SYSTEM



**“The single most important shift that has taken place in this County over the past seven years has been the realization and acceptance that child safety and child well-being are not solely the responsibility of DCFS. Everything else has flowed from that. The shift in collective mindset has resulted in greater cross-sector, cross-departmental collaboration than I’ve ever seen in my 17 years in this field. The role of philanthropy was a very significant and important factor. Philanthropy applied pressure and supplied support that facilitated the change.”**

— DR. TAMARA HUNTER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
L.A. COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Recognizing that the child protection system in L.A. County was overburdened with child maltreatment referrals and investigations, and that intervening in families already in crisis is not the best way to keep children safe and healthy, the Blue Ribbon Commission report emphasized the importance of preventive services. “Currently services typically do not begin until a child or family has contact with the child welfare system... This is far too late to keep children safe.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

True prevention requires looking beyond the child protection agency for solutions, particularly in L.A. County, where DCFS has “almost no control over the planning for or utilization of many of the resources necessary to keep children safe.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

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**“The first social worker that came out and took my son away from me, she told me that she could have given me a referral to go see a therapist before he was taken away, but she told me that after the fact. I wasn’t given the opportunity to do services before he was taken away.”**

— BIRTH PARENT, QUOTED IN THE BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION’S FINAL REPORT

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The commissioners knew that their ultimate vision of a County government in which all departments shoulder real responsibility for child and family well-being would require much greater collaboration between those agencies. “One meeting a year between County department heads, or very occasional meetings, do not accomplish the kind of integrated approach and strategic planning that the Commission strongly recommended.

We called for a real, consistent partnership between County departments,” observes commission co-executive director Adams. Although that is far from fully achieved, County leaders have taken steps in that direction in recent years.

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**“Families and children in the child welfare system (or at risk of entering that system) are at markedly elevated risk of trauma, which has significant mental health implications. If you don’t deal with this reality up front, then the success of everything else you do will be compromised. We must look not just at the child, but at their entire ecosystem—their households, their parents, their extended family and kin—because it is only that network, or that ‘nest,’ that will ultimately provide them a foundation to achieve health and well-being and to flourish in life.”**

— JONATHAN E. SHERIN, M.D., PH.D., DIRECTOR,  
LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH

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## Breaking Down Silos Within the County

Between 2016 and 2018, the L.A. County Board of Supervisors hired new leaders that have embraced calls for increased collaboration in important ways. In the background, philanthropic partners continue to provide critical support.



One such connection is the strong working relationship that emerged between DMH Director Jonathan Sherin, M.D., Ph.D., and former DCFS Director Bobby Cagle. Improving child and family well-being “is a collective challenge, and it requires a collective response. We have to stop saying, ‘This is a DCFS kid.’ Or ‘This is a DMH kid.’ These are all our kids,” says Dr. Sherin, a psychiatrist and neurologist by trade who is committed to preventing trauma. He and Cagle began holding joint retreats with their senior staff members in 2018 to advance their shared child well-being goals.

Not long after Dr. Sherin was hired, DMH discovered roughly \$200 million in unspent Mental Health Services Act funds slated to revert to the state. L.A. and other counties won additional time to spend the funds on innovative prevention and early intervention programs. Dr. Sherin reached out to Anderson at the Center for Strategic Partnerships for support in achieving his vision of spending these one-time dollars in ways that would expand the capacity of some of the County’s most effective existing prevention services and pave the way for additional, more sustainable public investments to follow.

The Center once again funded consultant Gita Murthy—with additional support from First 5 LA and Blue Shield of California Foundation—to develop a plan for these investments, which supported programs both within DMH and in other departments.

In June 2018, the Board approved the use of approximately \$28 million over two years to supplement DCFS funding for Prevention & Aftercare Services, a significant boost to the County’s most direct child abuse prevention services. The funds were used to train frontline staff to provide healing-informed services to families. Funds also supported the creation of a Child and Family Well-Being Center in South L.A. that will house DPH, DMH, and DCFS staff alongside other services for families.

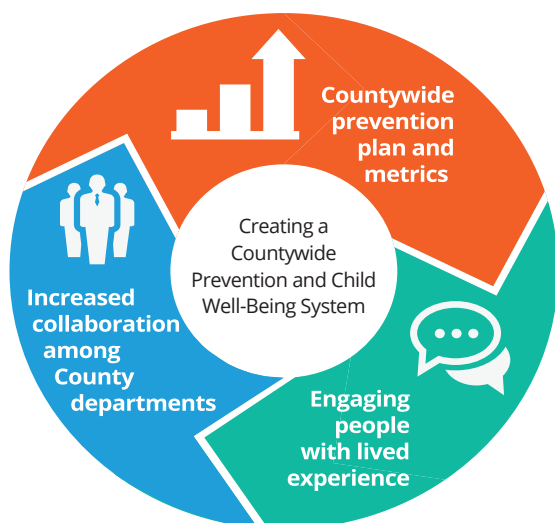


Another \$40 million was transferred to DPH to bolster a plan already in the works to coordinate and expand home visitation services throughout the County. This plan was funded in part by a grant from OCP and powered by hands-on consultant support from the Center for Strategic Partnerships. Research has consistently shown that home visiting services are one of the most effective means of supporting child and family well-being and preventing a host of negative outcomes, including child abuse and neglect, and the new DMH-funded contracts significantly widened the circle of County residents eligible for these programs.<sup>xxv</sup>

The subject of fostering additional opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration came up at a May 2019 meeting between the Center for Strategic Partnerships’ Advisory Council of philanthropic leaders and the directors of its seven funding County departments, including Cagle and Sherin. Despite the Blue Ribbon Commission’s recommendations, Garen recalls, “The seven department heads that were detailed to the Center still had never been treated by the County as a team, although they were periodically told to collaborate. They had never asked, ‘Given that we all serve the same families, what could we do together?’”

The idea of creating a joint planning retreat for the directors took root. The Center agreed to interview, hire, and fund a facilitator and support catering. Anthony and Jeanne Pritzker—leading child welfare philanthropists—offered their home for the November 2019 retreat.

Directors agreed to terms—no phones, no distractions for 24 hours—and created their own agenda.



By the end of the retreat, they agreed to keep talking, planning four additional get-togethers for 2020. Although that plan was curtailed by the pandemic, the directors did meet for a second (outdoor and socially distanced) gathering in October 2020, with support from the Center and the Parsons foundation.

## Rising to the Challenges of Structural Inequality

Decades of systemic racism and its effects pose one of the greatest threats to child and family well-being in America, and L.A. County is no exception. Any system that intends to support children and families, and prevent unnecessary family separation, must address this root cause.

Perhaps nothing in recent memory has made this as apparent as the COVID-19 pandemic. Neither the physical nor economic effects of this virus have been distributed equitably. Communities of color have been hit the hardest, in ways ranging from food insecurity to lack of access to high-speed internet and devices necessary to support remote learning.

Still, there are signs of hope. The years of collaboration catalyzed by the Blue Ribbon Commission enabled L.A. County and its philanthropic partners to work hand-in-hand in response to the COVID crisis. For some, the speed of collaborative pandemic responses reveals a previously untapped potential for more rapid change in the future. County CEO Fesia Davenport observes, “We are seeing the impact on generations of policies that did not support children and families. We are not going to address that in one fell swoop overnight. On the other hand, it’s amazing how many processes and procedures you can change in the midst of a pandemic.”

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**“A history of unfettered structural and systemic racism is at the root of so many problems. America, and certainly Southern California, is finally at a moment again where that is being talked about. Those systems were there before the virus. The virus has just accentuated their impact.”**

— FRED ALI, FORMER PRESIDENT AND CEO,  
WEINGART FOUNDATION & STEERING COMMITTEE  
MEMBER, COMMITTEE FOR GREATER L.A.

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Although no single solution can eradicate the impact of systemic racism on children and families, one common theme has emerged: To move a system toward greater equity, the individuals and communities most affected by



### The new L.A. County Youth Commission

will empower Los Angeles' youth to **use their voice** to help co-design and improve policies, programs, & services.



it must have a voice in how it operates. Carmen Noyola, who experienced the foster care and juvenile justice systems as a youth, and now advises the County on those same systems, observes, “Who better to tell you what the problems with the systems are than the people who are living through it, day in and day out?”

The County Board of Supervisors has heard the call, recently establishing a sweeping anti-racism initiative, an office of racial equity, and a youth commission, in addition to DCFS’s new faith-based unit.

Formalizing these partnerships does not come without challenges. County bureaucracy can still make sharing power, data, and decision-making difficult, even for well-intentioned staff. The issue was front and center for designers of the County Youth Commission. Although it was referred to as an “advisory board” in the Board Motion (introduced by Supervisors Hahn and Kuehl in February 2020) that enabled its creation, the youth advisors tapped to design it argued strongly for “commission.”

“What we meant by that was, we wanted it to have real decision-making power—for it to have a budget, the ability to audit programs and make recommendations,

and direct access to the Supervisors,” Youth Commission consultant and former foster and juvenile justice youth Lucero Noyola recalls. “Those things were non-negotiable for us.”

Consultant and former foster youth Jae Canas adds, “What we’re moving toward is greater centering of lived experience voices, not just by collecting feedback or offering a seat at the table to check a box, but by engaging more people with lived experience as experts and seeking their contributions in program development, design, and implementation. Not just asking, ‘What do you need?’ but ‘What are you passionate about? What can you create?’”

The faith-based community, meanwhile, seems to be concluding that while DCFS is a valued partner in supporting children and families, there is no need to wait for government to lead. It is important to Harris that 3FN remains its own grassroots organization, in partnership with DCFS but not under its direction. “We have to continue to serve our people, whether they are already in the care of DCFS or ideally earlier, so that we can prevent the need for DCFS involvement,” Harris says.

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**“We don’t want young people just to share their trauma. We want real solutions to come from this and, in the future, for governance to look like the community.”**

— CARMEN AND LUCERO NOYOLA, YOUTH COMMISSION CONSULTANTS AND FORMER FOSTER AND JUVENILE JUSTICE YOUTH

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To that end, the Center for Strategic Partnerships recently helped 3FN secure support from the W. M. Keck Foundation and The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation to conduct focus groups with the residents of South L.A. to better understand people’s attitudes and beliefs about foster care and how the group might increase the effectiveness of recruitment events.

Former Weingart Foundation President Fred Ali feels that the County’s connections to grassroots organizations like 3FN—connections that grantmaking foundations are ideally positioned to help foster—are critical to understanding the community’s needs and shifting the system toward a more preventive mindset. “I think we now see a stronger, more effective set of community-based organizations than ever before. I’m optimistic that we will see change because we have organizations on the outside [of County government] with the sophistication and know-how to push for that change.”

## On The Horizon

A handful of new initiatives—heavy on cross-system and cross-sector collaboration and community voice—are carrying L.A. County’s momentum forward and pointing to places where additional investments from within and outside the County can support lasting impact.

When Cagle was appointed director of DCFS, he asked the Board of Supervisors for a full year to listen and learn. “I could come in and implement change based upon what I’ve done in other locations, but that wouldn’t necessarily be the change that’s needed here,” Cagle says. The culmination of that listening was Invest LA, a strategic framework for the agency’s work that was launched in October 2019.

More than 200 stakeholders, including families and youth as well as representatives from philanthropy, community-based organizations, service providers, and fellow County departments, informed the three-point plan: strengthening children, youth, and families; workforce excellence; and community and cross-sector partnership.

Concurrently, a new, sweeping federal law and a partnership between the federal agency that oversees foster care and leading national foundations will both test and deepen the cross-sector efforts that L.A. has pioneered.

California and L.A. County are expected to begin implementation of the Prevention (Part I) elements of the Family First Prevention Services Act in 2022. Family First, passed in 2018, is the most significant change to federal child welfare financing in a generation. The law redirects federal funds previously used to support children in foster and congregate care toward evidence-based prevention services aimed at helping children remain safely in their own homes instead.

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**“What’s different about Thriving Families is that people with lived experience are really being treated as experts. We are no longer just being spoken to. We are sitting at the same table, included in the conversation and dialogue, and given space to question and challenge what others are saying. I think that’s what is needed to ensure that this work positively impacts the people who need it most, the young people in these systems.”**

— JAE CANAS, FORMER FOSTER YOUTH AND CONSULTANT, GITA MURTHY CONSULTING

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## ENHANCING HOUSING SUPPORT FOR SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUTH AND FAMILIES

*Child welfare-involved families and youth are among the most vulnerable populations to housing insecurity and homelessness. In 2018, the National Corporation for Supportive Housing hand-picked a small group of jurisdictions to address this issue through formal collaboration between their child welfare and supportive housing agencies.*

*The National Corporation approached the Center about including L.A. County in its **One Roof Leadership Institute for Supportive Housing and Child Welfare**. DCFS, the L.A. Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), and L.A. County CEO Homeless Initiative readily agreed to participate but requested backbone support from a consultant, which the Center provided with funding from the California Community Foundation and First 5 LA.*



The effort lives on as **One Roof L.A.**, with additional funding from:

- Reissa Foundation
- The Carl & Roberta Deutsch Foundation
- Rose Hills Foundation
- Specialty Family Foundation
- Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

### Center for Strategic Partnerships consultants helped One Roof L.A. partners:

- ▲ Provide stable, affordable housing options for nearly **400 more families and youth** through additional HUD vouchers.
- ▲ Roll out a **Housing First training** for DCFS staff.
- ▲ Create a permanent DCFS housing division to more rapidly **support families and youth who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.**

Although there are significant concerns about Family First's implementation, the collaboration envisioned by the Blue Ribbon Commission has compelled the County to prepare for this shift long before the law was passed. In December 2019, the Anthony and Jeanne Pritzker Family Foundation and Casey Family Programs worked with the Center for Strategic Partnerships to fund Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to help DCFS with additional planning for implementation.

In September 2020, L.A. County was selected as one of four jurisdictions nationally to participate in Thriving Families, Safer Children: A National Commitment to Well-Being. Thriving Families, a joint public-private initiative of the U.S. Children's Bureau, Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Prevent Child Abuse America, working in L.A. with OCP and DCFS, aims "to prove it is possible to fundamentally rethink child welfare by creating the conditions for strong, thriving families where children are free from harm."

The recent progress in L.A. played a significant role in its being the only County (along with three states) selected for the highest level of support. "There is a lot to build on in L.A.," Former Children's Bureau Associate Commissioner Jerry Milner says. "We wanted to ensure that we selected sites where leadership is willing to co-create a child well-being system in partnership with their communities. We were not looking for sites where this is necessarily going to be a child welfare agency-led initiative or effort. We were looking for leadership that was willing and committed to sharing power with community and other partners."

A similar community-driven approach was already being tested on a smaller scale in the Antelope Valley (AV), a high-need, resource-sparse area at the northernmost edge of L.A. County where young Gabriel Fernandez lived and died. After the AV was rocked by a second highly publicized child death bearing striking similarities to Gabriel's in 2018, the Center for Strategic Partnerships established a cross-sector working group to explore solutions. The Center secured funds from the Ballmer Group and the Reissa Foundation for the creation of a community-driven action plan. Casey Family Programs provided additional in-kind support. The effort, now known as the Antelope Valley Resource Infusion (AVRI), relies heavily on a collective impact framework and the voices of community residents to drive planning. Project manager Roxana Martinez, funded by First 5 LA and herself a long-time resident of the AV community, insists: "Nothing about AV without AV!"

Two programs currently under way in the AV are a community family resource center and Safe Families, a prevention strategy wherein "host families" recruited in places of worship care for children outside of the formal child welfare system, delaying and often preventing them from ever entering foster care. Although hopeful about the work that has happened so far, Martinez emphasizes that AVRI is a long-term investment. "We've made progress," she says. "But residents want to know, how do we get at the root causes of the issues that we're seeing and achieve sustainable systemic change?"

## CONCLUSION

**“Undoing harm is harder than preventing harm. We want to make sure that we are providing a continuum of services in the community as early as possible, and we will be working with our many partners here in L.A. County to define what that looks like.”**

— BOBBY CAGLE, FORMER DIRECTOR, L.A. COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES



DCFS, like most child protection agencies, largely succeeds at what it was designed to do: Keep children safe. Even so, the stories of youth who age out of foster care too often end poorly. Too few former foster youth finish—or even start—college. Far too many will find themselves homeless and jobless, at least for a time

Many in L.A. County, arguably those at DCFS most of all, want those stories to have happier endings. But after decades of trying, there is a growing recognition that DCFS (and its counterparts around the country) cannot—and should not—be solely responsible for the well-being of children, youth, and families. This acknowledgement has created space for other sectors and disciplines to step in and fill some of the gaps that will always exist in a government-funded system that was designed, not to prevent harm, but to serve those in greatest need after harm occurs.

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**“If you look at the child welfare system, everybody is stretched thin—social workers, judges, lawyers, other professionals—particularly in a county as large as Los Angeles. There are going to be cracks. In a sense, we’re helping to fill in a few of the cracks that exist in the County.”**

— HON. JUDGE MICHAEL NASH, DIRECTOR,  
L.A. COUNTY OFFICE OF CHILD PROTECTION

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In the past eight years, L.A. County has taken concrete, collaborative action in that direction. Much has been accomplished internally, through better coordination among County departments, but cross-agency collaboration is not enough. The real hope lies in the

partnership of charitable foundations, the advocacy of community-based organizations, the heart and soul of the faith community, and the voices of people who have been impacted by these systems themselves.

Former DCFS Director Cagle points out that even if County agencies could meet every need, government help is not always desired. “Our families often don’t trust government. You need partners in the community who can stand in the gap for these families, to provide what they need so that they are able to avoid involvement with our system altogether.”

Trust is a key element in collaboration, too, and one of the reasons why it takes time to build a system like the one that is coming together in L.A. County. “I truly believe that we do not have a resources problem, it’s just a matter of the gaps between the resources,” observes Joe Womac, president of the Specialty Family Foundation, a core funder of the Center. Capacity-building entities like the Center for Strategic Partnerships and OCP build trust over time. “They teach everybody involved that it’s possible,” Womac adds.

Wechsler, a philanthropic veteran in the child welfare space, agrees there has been a significant change in L.A. “We have really come together as a community around the issue of child welfare. It’s not top down. It’s community driven, funder driven, and public sector driven. It’s a culture shift.”

This culture shift can now be seen in other areas of the County, as well, notably in growing public-private collaboration to reduce the disproportionate impact of the juvenile justice system on Black and brown youth and support the County’s transition to a health-centered, holistic, care-first, jail-last approach to youth justice.

Where this all will lead is still an open question. Given the present challenges, rest is not an option.

The goal is nothing less than a richer, more complete safety net for the County's most vulnerable children, families, and communities—a seamless web of resources, ensuring all children and youth are safe and all families have what they need to stay together and thrive. It is still

just a vision, and most stakeholders would admit that L.A. County has a long way to go.

Still, in those rare times when everything—and everyone comes together, Garen says, “It’s as though you’re looking through a kaleidoscope, and suddenly the picture changes. You see a better future, and it seems possible. You see how you could get there.”

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<sup>i</sup> Calif. Dept. of Social Services. (2020, October 27). [https://cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/Additional-Resources/Letters-and-Notices/CFLs/2020/20-21\\_33.pdf](https://cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/Additional-Resources/Letters-and-Notices/CFLs/2020/20-21_33.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection. (2014, April 18). *The road to safety for our children (Final Report)*, p.ii. [http://ocp.lacounty.gov/Portals/OCP/PDF/Reports%20and%20Communication/OCP%20Background/Blue%20Ribbon%20Commission%20Final%20Report%20\(04-18-2014\).pdf.pdf?ver=2018-10-24-083549-867](http://ocp.lacounty.gov/Portals/OCP/PDF/Reports%20and%20Communication/OCP%20Background/Blue%20Ribbon%20Commission%20Final%20Report%20(04-18-2014).pdf.pdf?ver=2018-10-24-083549-867)

<sup>iii</sup> Blue Ribbon Commission, p.13.

<sup>iv</sup> Hamai, S. A. (2015, March 16). Response to board motion on developing a proposed mission statement on child safety (Memo to Board of Supervisors).

<sup>v</sup> Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. (2015, October 6). Board Motion. <http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/98023.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. (2018, September 18). Board Motion: Expanding public-private partnership in Los Angeles County. <http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/126630.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Calif. Dept. of Social Services. (2020, October 27). [https://cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/Additional-Resources/Letters-and-Notices/CFLs/2020/20-21\\_33.pdf](https://cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/Additional-Resources/Letters-and-Notices/CFLs/2020/20-21_33.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> City News Service. (2018, September 19). L.A. County seeks to expand public-private partnerships. <https://theavtimes.com/2018/09/19/l-a-county-seeks-to-expand-public-private-partnerships/>

<sup>ix</sup> Calif. Dept. of Social Services. (2020, July 31). [https://cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/Additional-Resources/Letters-and-Notices/CFLs/2020/20-21\\_04.pdf](https://cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/Additional-Resources/Letters-and-Notices/CFLs/2020/20-21_04.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> Analyses of County data by *The Imprint*: <https://www.fostercarecapacity.com/stories/higher-calling-l-a-county-increases-its-reliance-on-churches-to-serve-foster-children> and <https://imprintnews.org/news-2/foster-parent-recruitment-crisis-l-county-zip-code/23551>

<sup>xi</sup> Blue Ribbon Commission, p. 24

<sup>xii</sup> Blue Ribbon Commission, p. 22

<sup>xiii</sup> Kuehl, S. (2016, May 31). Let's find more homes for foster youth. <https://supervisorkuehl.com/lets-find-more-homes-for-foster-youth/>

<sup>xiv</sup> Child Trends. (n.d.) *Evaluation of Los Angeles County's Upfront Family Finding pilot: Executive summary*. [https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Upfront-Family-Finding\\_ChildTrends\\_Nov-2018.pdf](https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Upfront-Family-Finding_ChildTrends_Nov-2018.pdf)

<sup>xv</sup> Loudenback, J. (2016, December 21). The foster parent recruitment crisis in Los Angeles by ZIP code. *The Imprint*. <https://imprintnews.org/news-2/foster-parent-recruitment-crisis-l-county-zip-code/23551>.

<sup>xvi</sup> Abram, S. (2019, December 10). Protest targets a sky-high foster care removal rate in L.A. County. *The Imprint*. <https://imprintnews.org/child-welfare-2/protest-targets-a-sky-high-foster-care-removal-rate-in-l-a-county/39589>.

<sup>xvii</sup> Nichols, B. (2017, August 3). Response to the May 9, 2017, board motion (Item No. 2) introduced by Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas regarding the June 3, 2017, resource family recruitment convening. L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services. <http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/113805.pdf>

<sup>xviii</sup> Personal communication, Lou Moore, February 23, 2021.

<sup>xix</sup> Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. (2018, September 25). Board Motion: African-American Community Engagement – A Faith Based Model. <http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/126789.pdf>

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Blue Ribbon Commission, p.26

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