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# Child Welfare Practice: Creating a Successful Climate for Change

*Findings and considerations  
from an Institutional Analysis*

Center  
for the  
Study  
of  
Social  
Policy



Executive Summary

# Executive Summary

In 2010, the state of California became one of six federally supported initiatives seeking to develop and test approaches for improving the well-being of foster children and youth. As a part of this federal effort, the state began the California Partners for Permanency (CAPP) project which specifically focuses on finding and/or supporting legally permanent and loving homes for African American and Native American children who are overrepresented in the child welfare system and stay in foster care for extended periods of time. The centerpiece of the initiative is a strength-based, collaboratively-designed Child and Family Practice Model. This model is grounded in research and supported by a diverse array of partners, including parents, adolescents and caregivers who have experienced child welfare system interventions. Further, this model is intended to reduce disparate outcomes for children and families and enhance pathways to permanency for all who enter California foster care.

Los Angeles is one of the pilot counties for the CAPP project. Participating jurisdictions were asked to assess problematic policies and practices that may impact the implementation of the CAPP model. In Los Angeles, part of this assessment was completed through application of an Institutional Analysis methodology.

## The Institutional Analysis

Developed by Dr. Ellen Pence and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), the Institutional Analysis (IA) is a diagnostic process that is grounded in institutional ethnography,<sup>1</sup> a form of sociology which produces “accounts of institutional practices that can explain how workers are organized and coordinated to talk about and act on cases.”<sup>2</sup> The IA employs various data collection techniques (observation, interviews, text and data analyses). Using these techniques, the IA explored how child welfare work in three<sup>3</sup> local offices in Los Angeles County, as it is institutionally organized, may contribute to failed reunification and longer stays in foster care for African American children. The intent of the IA is not to identify shortcomings or failures of individual caseworkers, supervisors, administrators, clinical providers, judges, lawyers or community partners. Instead, the IA examines problematic institutional assumptions, policies and protocols that organize or drive practitioner action, and by doing so empower institutions with the information to engage in constructive reform.

This report provides additional information to consider in the design and implementation of the CAPP practice model. In addition, it identifies for Los Angeles County specific problematic practices resulting from the way the work is currently organized in the Pomona, Torrance, and Wateridge offices and, to some extent, across the county.

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<sup>1</sup> The field of institutional ethnography is often attributed to the thinking and work of Dorothy Smith. See Smith, D.E. (2005). *Institutional Ethnography: Sociology for people* (Toronto: AltaMira Press).

<sup>2</sup> Pence, Ellen, Ph.D. and Smith, Dorothy, Ph.D. (forthcoming). *The Institutional Analysis: Matching what institutions do with what people need*.

<sup>3</sup> The Pomona and Torrance offices engaged in Institutional Analyses in April 2011; Wateridge in May 2012.

Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Los Angeles Family Court have made efforts to remedy some of the findings identified in the Institutional Analysis and have outlined an action plan, which is included in the full report.

## **Building Blocks for Change**

The Institutional Analysis (IA) examines system functioning from the perspective and experiences of families and identifies areas for system improvement so that families achieve better outcomes. As such, the IA focuses on the problematic features of institutions, rather than strengths of institutions. However, during data collection, the IA does identify positive practices with families and opportunities that systems can leverage to enhance services and supports to families.

Los Angeles County DCFS and Juvenile Court have demonstrated a commitment to improving child welfare system outcomes by engaging in innovative projects such as the federal IV-E Waiver program,<sup>4</sup> Point of Engagement,<sup>5</sup> Youth Self-Sufficiency Program,<sup>6</sup> National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' (NCJFCJ) Model Courts,<sup>7</sup> The Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project<sup>8</sup> and more recently the California Partners for Permanency (CAPP) project. In addition, Los Angeles is also enhancing child welfare practice through its response to the *Katie A.* settlement agreement.<sup>9</sup> The *Katie A.* settlement focuses on better serving a subset of children and youth through mental health-child welfare partnerships.

These and other efforts found across all three offices, provide the County with significant support for making the improvements necessary to address the problematic practices identified in the Institutional Analyses. Additional building blocks of note include:

- **Leadership's commitment to decreasing racial disproportionality and disparities.** Los Angeles County participated in the California Disproportionality Project and, with the support of Casey Family Programs, a task force chaired by Judge Nash continues to work county-wide on improving practice, policy and outcomes related to racial disparity. Pomona is developing culturally specific resources for both professionals and families. In addition, the Pomona office established new promising initiatives<sup>10</sup> in an effort to decrease disproportionality and disparity and improve outcomes for all. Torrance leadership is increasing engagement of community providers and of youth, internally grappling with racial disproportionality and disparity, identifying informal advocates to support families navigating the system and taking steps to keep families together safely. The Wateridge office leadership has a strong relationship with the Black Community Task Force, a community-based advocacy group.
- **Efforts to improve communication and partnership with the Courts.** With the alignment of DCFS offices with court departments, all three offices are cultivating relationships with the judges, commissioners and referees with responsibility for the families that they serve.
- **Efforts to engage families and community partners.** All three offices have implemented Team Decision Making (TDM) to bring families and their supports together to make decisions about children. Pomona has also established the Parents in Partnership program, which includes a parent advocate and cultural broker, to support parents as they navigate the child welfare system. Torrance's foster youth find support through participation in a Teen Club and community partners express that they are "reengaged"

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<sup>4</sup> Los Angeles County is engaged in a multi-year federal Title IV-E Waiver demonstration program to: improve safety, increase permanence, reduce reliance on out-of-home care and focus on child and family well-being. For more information about the Los Angeles IV-E Waiver: [http://lacdcls.org/TitleIVE/documents/TitleIV-EWaiver\\_6\\_8\\_11.pdf](http://lacdcls.org/TitleIVE/documents/TitleIV-EWaiver_6_8_11.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> *Point of Engagement: Reducing Disproportionality and Improving Child and Family Outcomes*: [http://www.chhs.ca.gov/initiatives/CAChildWelfareCouncil/Documents/SHIELDS%20Compton%20Project%20POE%20rev\\_Final1.doc](http://www.chhs.ca.gov/initiatives/CAChildWelfareCouncil/Documents/SHIELDS%20Compton%20Project%20POE%20rev_Final1.doc)

<sup>6</sup> *Foster Youth Demonstration Project: Los Angeles California Project Profile* (2008): [http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/EmPLOY/pdf/DOL\\_SiteReport\\_LA.pdf](http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/EmPLOY/pdf/DOL_SiteReport_LA.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> NCJFCJ: Dependency Model Court List: <http://ncjfcj.org/our-work/dependency-model-court-list>

<sup>8</sup> Casey Family Programs wrote a series of reports on child welfare reform efforts in Los Angeles, California. *Stories of Prevention in Los Angeles county: DCFS and Community Agencies Join Hands to Support Families and Children* (July 2009) focuses on The Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project: <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/StoriesOfPreventionLA.pdf>. *Stories of Practice Change in Los Angeles County: Building Community Partnerships in Pomona and Lancaster* (Fall 2011) highlighted Los Angeles' use of a Title IV-E Waiver to foster partnerships to improve service delivery and outcomes: [http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/Stories\\_CommunityPartnerships.pdf](http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/Stories_CommunityPartnerships.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> *Katie A. v. Bontá* is a class action lawsuit against the California Departments of Health Services (DHS) and Social Services (CDSS) and the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) for their collective failure to provide medically necessary and legally required mental health services to applicable foster children or children deemed at risk of removal from their families.

<sup>10</sup> Examples include Family to Family, Team Decision Making meetings and specialized permanency units.

by Torrance's new leadership. The Black Community Task Force, His Sheltering Arms and Tessie Cleveland are long-standing committed community organizations that work with the Wateridge office and serve people living in South Los Angeles. In fact, The Black Community Task Force extends its advocacy for families county-wide.

- **Focus on early intervention, permanency and well-being.** Pomona's current efforts have decreased disproportionality. Efforts include staff and community partnership trainings, work to include community partners at TDM meetings, and the implementation of a Youth Permanency Unit and Permanency Partners Program, focused on finding permanent homes for older youth. Recent Torrance data shows that the office is keeping more children safely in their homes. Torrance's community partners and court staff understand their mission as keeping families together and reunifying separated families.<sup>11</sup>
- **Quality Assurance (QA) efforts established as part of Katie A.** Los Angeles, as part of the Katie A. federal lawsuit settlement, is required to regularly assess the quality of practice with all children and families in all local offices. The assessment effort involves employing a process referred to as Quality Service Reviews (QSRs).<sup>12</sup> This process has been used in many jurisdictions around the country to improve frontline practice. The QSR intentionally gathers information and perspectives from families, youth, caregivers and professionals serving the families and youth as part of assessing quality. All three local offices had participated in a first round of these quality reviews.
- **Implementation of data-driven management.** In the last year, LA DCFS leadership has begun holding monthly meetings for mid- to upper-level managers to monitor priority outcomes for the Department via a Data Dashboard. The data-driven management process includes collecting, disseminating and analyzing quantitative and qualitative information on priority outcome measures to understand what is working well and what needs to be improved, and engaging in ongoing learning at all levels of the organization to craft, implement and refine strategies based on relevant and timely information.

## Findings

The Institutional Analyses in Los Angeles County focused on two questions:

1. *How does it come about that many African American children do not reunify with their parents or find alternative, timely permanency?*
2. *What about the ways in which the child protective system and its partners are organized, through policies and practices, contribute to this poor outcome?*

In response to these questions, the IA found that the county offices lacked a consistent, persistent focus on permanency for children, particularly for older youth. Furthermore, across the three offices, African American families and youth experienced a child welfare institution that:

- **Lacks effective engagement.** The child welfare institution has not organized or equipped its practitioners—social workers, lawyers, judges—to effectively engage children, youth, parents and their extended family systems. Hampered by high caseloads and heavy workloads, practitioners have little time to know or listen to families. There is an absence of authentic family and youth voices in decision-making despite the implementation of the Team Decision Making strategy in all offices.
- **Inadequately matches services to needs.** Because practitioners are not organized to effectively engage children, youth, parents and extended family systems, the product of service planning is not necessarily what works for families but rather a list of services required to be completed. Parents are required to secure and pay for their own services, an insurmountable task for many because there are insufficient approved, affordable and accessible services. The mismatch can produce delays in children achieving permanency and can interfere with parents' and children's healing and recovery.

<sup>11</sup>Historically, Wateridge made significant efforts to support families at the front door through voluntary family services and Point of Engagement, however high caseloads have impeded this offices ability to robustly maintain these efforts.

<sup>12</sup>For a description of the QSR approach, see The Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (2011). *Counting is Not Enough: Investing in Qualitative Case Reviews for Practice Improvement in Child Welfare.*

- **Pays insufficient attention to the trauma, particularly grief and loss, experienced by families.** The inattention to underlying needs and feelings is symptomatic of the lack of engagement, timely assessments, knowledge of human development and healing strategies. Children and youth in the foster care system have experienced traumatic events ranging from physical and sexual abuse to loss, neglect and removal from their homes. Parents often have their own histories of trauma that affect their caregiving capacities.<sup>13</sup> However, services are put into place that do not address these needs and subsequent behaviors of parents and youth are therefore misunderstood and mischaracterized as “hostile”, “psychotic”, or “non-compliant.” Further, by not attending to this trauma, relative caregivers and other adults who were options for permanency do not have the support they need to care for the youth.
- **Is not organized to work with families in a coherent way.** Multiple practitioners, organized by different missions and job functions, regulations and administrative procedures intervene in the lives of youth and families, sequentially and simultaneously but often with little coordination or teaming. Observers described parents’ confusion regarding the number of different workers and “inside language.” It is unclear who the client is and if reunification is a priority.
- **Undermines family connections.** Interventions do not account for family systems – how they are organized and their strengths and tensions. As a result, family systems may be undermined rather than effectively included as part of the planning team. Family connections are difficult to maintain and nurture because children are often placed at great distances from their parents. The time required to travel for parent-child visits conflicts with time needed to complete court-ordered services. Further, Los Angeles County’s rules and regulations regarding placement can hinder children’s placement with safe, loving family members.
- **Provides limited advocacy.** The structure for parent representation often leaves parents unaware of their rights and results in relevant information omitted to court officers and progress toward permanency slowed. Attorneys for parents have very high caseloads, ranging between 200-300 cases with most attorneys interviewed having caseloads around 250-260. Attorneys acknowledged that high caseloads prevent

them from being effective on many of their cases. Attorney reimbursement arrangements further offer little time or incentive to engage in activities outside of court appearances (e.g., writing motions or attending critical meetings). The high volume of cases in court requires an efficient system, but an unintended consequence of the drive for efficiency is that most cases are heard and matters decided during a very short hearing at the cost of meaningful decisionmaking.

- **Privileges system functioning and needs over the functioning and needs of families.** While it is important for agencies to identify efficiencies in order to function smoothly, the IA found a strong preference for focusing on institutional needs to relay information or accomplish particular tasks over a family’s need to have time to understand the process, express emotions or make thoughtful decisions. The lack of privacy experienced by families, distances between offices and the community, and the need to comply with “institutional time” (time periods that work for the institution but not necessarily for individuals) are examples of how the institution privileges its own functioning over the needs of families.

While the IA found variations of the above themes in all three offices, there was an additional finding unique to the Wateridge office:

- **The complex challenges faced by many African American families served by the Wateridge office reflect the effects of disinvestment in their community.** Many families living in South Los Angeles face significant challenges as a result of larger disinvestment in their community—many struggle to find adequate housing and jobs, healthy and affordable food, safe and academically challenging schools, and clean, secure parks and neighborhoods. In addition to the larger infrastructure issues faced by many in South Los Angeles, interviewees reported that South Los Angeles has poor services, particularly prevention services. The overwhelming needs in SPA 6 and, in particular the community served by the Wateridge office, leaves advocates to regularly ask, “*Why wouldn’t you want to put [the] best services and highest level of resources in the poorest community?*” Yet the families and children that the Wateridge office serves are disadvantaged because of where the office is located, the high caseloads of workers, the high level of worker turnover and high

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<sup>13</sup>New Jersey Child Advocate, *Protecting and Promoting Meaningful Connections: The Importance of quality family time in parent-child visitation* (January 2010). See also The National Child Traumatic Stress Network factsheet series on Birth Parents with Trauma Histories and the Child Welfare System, retrieved from [www.ntctsn.org/resources/topics/child-welfare-system](http://www.ntctsn.org/resources/topics/child-welfare-system).

numbers of new, inexperienced workers. Unlike in either Pomona or Torrance, the main Wateridge office is located seven to ten miles from the community it serves and in an office complex that only has paid parking immediately adjacent to the building.<sup>14</sup> Workers' caseloads are not supposed to exceed 38 cases, higher than either the caseload averages in the Pomona or Torrance office. Wateridge is considered a training ground for all new workers, many of whom move on after a year. The impact of transfers and constant caseload juggling means there is little relief for staff and service to clients is continually disrupted.

### Institutional Conditions and Features Contributing to the Outcomes Experienced by African American Families and Youth

The findings about what African American families' experience, described above, are not the result of individual practice idiosyncrasies of case workers, supervisors, departmental leadership, attorneys or judicial officers. Rather, multiple circumstances contribute to the current situation. Figure 1 enumerates the contributors discussed in great detail in the full report.

**FIGURE 1. Summary of Institutional Conditions and Features Contributing to the Outcomes Experienced by African American Families and Youth**

***Overarching institutional conditions that contribute to the experience of African American Families***

- High caseloads preventing effective work with families
- Culture of fear inhibiting workers
- Rules and regulations deterring relative placement
- Lack of meaningful infrastructure to support DCFS in providing parents with 'reasonable efforts' to reunify

***Specific institutional features that are problematic for African American families***



**Mission, purpose and various job functions**

- A gap exists between DCFS' mission and actions.
- Contract providers are not aligned with DCFS' mission.
- Team Decision Making meetings are not a valued function.



**Rules and Regulations**

- Rules regarding provision of family preservation services are unclear.
- Contracts negatively affect service availability, continuity, and provider collaboration.
- Policies hamper linkages with out-of-county services.
- Worker transfer policies undermine continuity of services to families.

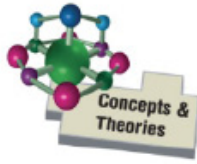


**Administrative Practices**

- Tools are insufficient to guide workers in effectively meeting the needs of families and youth.
- Delayed transfer of cases to continuing services workers affects timely permanency.
- Timing of court hearings and other appointments have implications for other obligations of parents and youth.
- Parents experience multiple attorneys over the course of their case.
- Relative caregivers do not receive timely required financial support.

<sup>14</sup> Parking is reimbursed by the department for appointments before 5:00 p.m., however, the Wateridge office's budget must account for parking for all its employees and visitors.

## Specific institutional features that are problematic for African American families



### Concepts and Theories

- Parents must prove they love their children.
  - Responsibility for change is on the individual, not the intervention.
  - There is a limited view of who constitutes the “client family.”
  - Drug use is viewed as an automatic safety concern requiring removal.
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### Resources

- Large docket of cases requires courts to move quickly.
  - Limited placement options and convenient visiting options affect family connections.
  - Concrete supports needed by families are insufficient.
  - Therapeutic services that are a good fit to what works for families are insufficient.
  - Parent advocacy resources are limited.
  - Utilization of some resources is unknown.
  - There is inadequate technology/support for effectively helping parents find resources.
  - Court logistics are unwelcoming to families.
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### Linkages

- Problems sharing information among providers can result in needs of families being overlooked/ unaddressed.
  - Judicial officers are not consistently informed by those who can best share knowledge of the family.
  - Court-ordered case plans are not always consistent with case plans provided to parents by the case worker.
  - Late court reports impede effective legal representation of parents.
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### Accountability

- There are weak mechanisms for obtaining and using family/youth feedback on the quality of services.
  - DCFS contracted services are not held accountable for services they provide to families.
  - DCFS lacks sufficient policies, protocols and supervisory practices to ensure respectful and consistent practice.
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### Education and Training

- Attorneys lack relevant training.
  - Children's Social Workers, caregivers and some providers have insufficient knowledge and skills to address the trauma and mental health needs of clients.
  - Inadequate knowledge of adolescents and effective engagement skills hinders permanency work with youth.
  - Training to work with people of different races, ethnicity and cultures appears insufficient.
  - Social workers lack knowledge about community resources and risks.
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## Considerations for Improvement

Making the child welfare system work better for African American families and children in Los Angeles County requires county, state and even federal advocacy; additional resources; and major shifts in practitioners' job duties, daily case processing routines and locally and externally produced policy. Multiple circumstances contribute to the current situation. As noted in Figure 1, the most pervasive contributors found by this IA are: 1) the **high caseloads** of workers, 2) the pervasive **culture of fear** in the workforce as a result of multiple child deaths and subsequent repercussions, 3) the **barriers to placing children and youth with relatives**, and 4) the great **difficulty parents have in finding acceptable, affordable and accessible services**. In order to make and sustain improvements for children, youth, and families, these four issues must be addressed.

The considerations for improvement offered here are divided into two parts, aligned with the division of findings in Figure 1. The first part offers suggestions for addressing the abovementioned most pervasive contributors. The second part offers suggestions keyed more closely to the institutional features that are frequently found to be problematic in child welfare: agency missions, job functions, rules and regulations, administrative policies and protocols, resources and accountability mechanisms.

It is important to note that not all change must happen at once. DCFS and its partners need to determine what change can occur quickly and easily and what will require enlisting other partners within the county and state. Los Angeles County, with its participation in the CAPP project and implementation of its many practice improvement strategies including the Core Practice Model and Quality Service Reviews, has an opportunity to make some significant local changes and to influence state and federal thinking.

### **1. Meeting the Most Significant Challenges Head-On**

The same bold thinking reflected in County initiatives such as the CAPP and Los Angeles Core Practice Models needs to be applied to designing the proper infrastructure to provide staff and families with the time and quality services necessary for children to successfully reunify with their parents or timely find other permanent homes. This redesign should:

*Lower caseloads/workloads so that workers and attorneys have the time and resources to do "best practices."*

- **Establish county-wide caseload standards for child welfare social workers.** Caseload standards should be set at a level that will support the successful implementation of CAPP and Core Practice model; reducing the caseload sizes/workload especially in the Wateridge office is an urgent priority. DCFS should determine appropriate caseload sizes based on known needs of the population served and resources available in each community.<sup>15</sup>
- **Work with the union to establish new requirements for transferring staff so that caseloads are not so dramatically affected and workforce stability is promoted.** The current policy of allowing a new social worker to transfer offices after one-year essentially treats the first office assignment as a training exercise. It does not benefit the office that has invested in the worker nor does constant turnover serve the community well. Additionally, worker continuity has been demonstrated to affect the timeliness of permanency.<sup>16</sup>
- **Reduce caseloads of attorneys representing parents and children, promote high quality standards of legal representation and consider multidisciplinary model.** High caseloads are widely recognized as a barrier to quality legal representation. The American Bar Association has recommended caseloads of no more than 50-100 cases depending on attorney experience and skill level. Multidisciplinary parent legal representation programs that include attorneys, social workers and parent partners provide families with comprehensive services to families prior to entering and throughout involvement with the child welfare system.<sup>17</sup>
- **Pilot a neighborhood office concept in the community served by the Wateridge office.** South Los Angeles is perceived to be the most challenging area to work in with regard to the difficulties the families face. Testing a whole new approach as it implements CAPP, Wateridge may become an area where caseloads are capped at an appropriate level, people want to work and funders want to invest. Wateridge would have the potential of becoming the model office, not the system's "boot camp." This new design would

<sup>15</sup> For recommended caseload size see Child Welfare League of America, <http://www.cwla.org/newsevents/news030304cwlacaseload.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Potter, C.C., and Klein-Rothchild, S (2002) Getting home on time: Predicting timely permanence for young children. *Child Welfare*, LXXXI(2), 123-150.

<sup>17</sup> American Bar Association (2006). *The Standards of Practice for Attorneys Representing Parents in Abuse and Neglect Cases*.



mean moving staff out of the office that is currently outside the community and could mean co-locating staff in provider agency facilities. In these new locations, consider having a new configuration of workers and supervisors, e.g. two supervisors to teams of workers; institutionalizing a team approach and regular meeting/sharing. Work assignments should be aligned with schools/hospitals in the community to facilitate stronger teaming, functional partnerships and overall collaboration with the community. The operational design of a newly restructured community office should be done in collaboration with community partners.

- **Reassign county resources to DCFS offices to be more in line with the office workload.** Some resources are provided to each office on an equal basis rather than an equitable basis, that is, each office regardless of size receives the same number of specialty staff, without accounting for the service volume as demonstrated by the needs of the population being served. Data from and about the community, historical service trends, upfront assessments and MAT assessments can be used to better identify the mental health and economic linkage resources needed in a given office, rather than a “one to one” distribution.
- **Examine the requirements for supporting children in guardianships to determine how families can receive the necessary support without keeping them under court supervision.** The current practice of “guardianship with dependency” provides some support to families and children. However, the IA examined cases where there were no safety or risk issues. Keeping cases open for the purpose of providing support to families where there is no safety or risk concerns adds to caseloads, does not necessarily establish permanent homes for children and keeps families under unnecessary surveillance. The State, as part of CAPP, should examine alternative means to provide this level of support to families.

*Move DCFS from a culture of fear to a culture of learning*

- **DCFS needs to authentically engage the communities it serves in order to create and sustain trust, decision-making transparency and partnerships needed to help families.** The Annie E. Casey Foundation learned from its Family to Family initiative that

“*Strong relationships with the community will help sustain changes and can help the agency in the face of various kinds of pressure – for example, from the media or the courts.*”<sup>19</sup> The current atmosphere in Los Angeles County is due, in part, to community members and leadership not being familiar with the difficult work or decisions of DCFS and the challenges families face are abstract to them. Lack of knowledge hinders trust and can leave the agency standing alone when challenged—this in turn affects the families served. There are many ways DCFS can become more transparent, the community engaged, and more learning encouraged beginning with two efforts that are already in place: Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings and Quality Service Reviews (QSRs). Opening TDM meetings to intentional, regular community participation can help make the Department’s decision-making more transparent. It also helps the larger community learn and understand the resources that are necessary for families to be preserved, or when children must be removed, to be successfully reunified. Likewise, it helps DCFS staff learn what the community has to offer and who can provide support. In another way, QSRs provide opportunities for building trust and offering transparency. Through QSR community results sharing meetings community leadership learns more about the work of DCFS and the needs of families. Furthermore, like TDMs, QSRs can offer individuals from the community and leadership first-hand observations of DCFS practice and family needs. Many jurisdictions have invited legislators, civic leaders and other community members to “shadow” a QSR reviewer and to meet with the social workers and supervisors working with families as well as the families themselves. The experience has helped build bridges of understanding between the child welfare departments and the community leadership in these jurisdictions. Finally, the CAPP project implementation can also be leveraged to build strong community partnerships. The CAPP Case Practice elements of Teaming and Well-being Partnerships provide the framework for clearly defining the functions, definitions and procedures for including families, communities and Tribes.

- **Revise and/or establish a death review/critical incidence protocol that includes assessing and providing support to staff and families who have been involved.** Across the country, unfortunately,

<sup>18</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Family to Family Tools for Rebuilding Foster Care Lessons Learned*, July 2001, Baltimore, MD. page 18.

<sup>19</sup> Schon, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals Think in Action*. Basic Books

children die who are, or were, known to the child welfare system. Usually, a combination of individual, family, community and system factors contribute to these deaths. The police, child welfare, mental health, behavioral health, the schools and other public serving systems cannot completely prevent these tragedies. However, a thoughtful and intentional death review/critical incidence protocol is necessary to hold individuals and systems accountable for egregious mistakes and to continuously improve the child welfare system's ability to realize its mission of ensuring children are safe and supporting families. Too often the way in which states and local governments respond to these situations is reactionary and results in a culture that directly conflicts with the stated mission of the agency. The County Board of Supervisors and DCFS need to review their respective processes for child death reviews in partnership with key stakeholders in order to ensure that the culture of the county and the organization aligns with the overarching mission and goals of the agency. The protocol should emphasize learning to ensure that continued practice improvement occurs and that staff feels supported in their work rather than demonized. The exception that all staff should understand is that when an egregious performance issue has resulted in a child death, they will be held accountable. However, in most cases, larger system failures can be identified and addressed in order to build a stronger child welfare system. The new practice reforms under CAPP and *Katie A.* will only succeed within a culture that acknowledges the complex environment that exists and the unfortunate reality of child deaths and critical incidents that can occur even under well functioning child welfare systems.

#### ***Examine Los Angeles County's interpretation and implementation of ASFA in order alleviate barriers to otherwise suitable relative placement***

- While the county has initiated some effort to improve understanding of ASFA requirements and timeliness of response to families seeking to be placement resources, more is needed. The examination suggested here should determine where federal requirements end and California state and/or Los Angeles County requirements begin. Los Angeles County appears to have more stringent requirements for potential caregivers than federal law requires. This affects family members and others who wish to be considered placement resources for children in their community. The reexamination of the rules should determine what is absolutely essential for child safety and what rules can be relaxed in order to promote safe family placements.

#### ***Work with parents, parent advocates, DCFS staff, community providers and court officers to create a rational means for ensuring that parents are receiving meaningful, relevant services***

- As the system currently operates, the federally established 'reasonable efforts' standard to support parents in reunifying with their children is not meaningful. Creating a more supportive approach to parents means seeking ways to provide them with greater assistance in finding appropriate service providers and in providing financial services to pay for these services. A more supportive approach also requires establishing a clear set of criteria for service providers to meet and allowing DCFS to apply the criteria without court permission. The criteria should be based on practice based evidence with different populations, not solely on professional credentials or location.

#### **2. Changing the institutional features of DCFS and its partners to create a climate for successful child welfare practice.**

The previous discussion highlights four pervasive institutional conditions that will hinder successful practice improvements. However, the IA uncovered several more institutional features that contribute to the experience of African American families.

#### ***Ensure Agency Missions and Job Functions Are Aligned with Practice Vision***

- **DCFS should review its mission statement and functional descriptions of the various units.** The purpose of the review is to assess whether the agency's guiding statements and documents accurately reflect the values and principles of the agency today and where the agency wants to head. The mission articulated by leadership and staff is different from the mission in the Los Angeles case practice model, thus it is important to create overall clarity and joint understanding about the mission and values of DCFS.
- **Redefine the role of social workers to explicitly include supporting parents in reunifying with their children.** The IA found that workers, described as Children's Social Workers, are primarily tasked with monitoring parents' compliance with case plans/court orders rather than working collaboratively with them to reunify with their children. Job descriptions could be rewritten to emphasize priorities and realign expectations.

*Ensure agency rules, policies and practices are aligned with practice vision and specifically emphasize the safe and timely permanency of children, with their own families if possible*

- **Examine all current forms and procedures used for assessment and case planning for their relevance to family-centered case practice and how they help inform or hinder the work (with contradictory guidance to case managers).** The Department has several forms that are used as the foundation for gathering knowledge about families and children, assessing safety and risk and making decisions. These forms should be assessed to determine if they are designed to accomplish or support desired practice.
- **Strengthen TDM process with facilitators and all staff to make this a meaningful process for families and staff alike.** Giving TDM facilitators the time to meet with youth/family before TDM meetings will allow the facilitators to learn about the family and prepare youth and families for TDM participation. Revising DCFS 174 to separate community representation from family's informal support will clarify that inviting community representation is a requirement, not an option.
- **Review and amend contracts with service providers,** as necessary, to support the work toward permanency by better enabling provider participation in TDMs, continued service to a child/youth no matter where child is placed, family preservation services to be offered earlier to families who have the goal of reunification and evaluation and accountability for promoting permanency for children and youth.

*Ensure community-based, high quality services*

- **DCFS should expand service options, availability, accessibility and affordability.** The IA revealed multiple challenges in Los Angeles County with regard to the availability of affordable and approved services to match the needs of African American families and youth. As a result, more services need to be community based – in the communities in which the families and children “call home.” This includes developing appropriate mental health services for children and adults alike and placement options for youth. In particular there is a need for neighborhood foster homes that have the skills to work with challenging children and youth to help them heal.
- **Consider establishing community-based satellite juvenile courts** to make court proceedings more accessible to families and youth served particularly in

communities facing similar distance and transportation challenges as the South Los Angeles community served by the Wateridge office. As with the previous recommendation to pilot neighborhood offices, the design and location of the satellite courts should be a collaborative effort with the communities.

- **Evaluate policy changes that allow communities on the county perimeter to have more direct access/linkage with resources in bordering counties.** The IA found placement and service barriers to families and children in the jurisdiction of Los Angeles County but living in perimeter counties. Consider streamlining the approval process for out-of-county placements or give offices like Pomona the authority to place children in a neighboring county. Consider allowing youth who are moved to another county to continue to access services in Los Angeles County.
- **Encourage and support providers in meeting DCFS and court criteria by offering training scholarships to providers to get the necessary certification or waive required fees for licensure.** Service providers who are accessible and affordable for parents should be considered and encouraged to meet the requirements of the Department and/or the Court by having opportunities to receive the necessary training or establish the infrastructure required for licensure at a free or reduced cost.

*Continue development and refinement of data agenda and quality assurance mechanisms that provide useful feedback to all practitioners and improve outcomes for families*

- **Ensure effective utilization and performance tracking mechanisms are in place for key practice elements and resources** such as TDMs, Independent Living Services, court mediation services, family preservation services and neighborhood-based placement resources. These tracking systems should be able to collect data on use and performance by race and ethnicity. Data should be shared with workers and supervisors regularly. Data should also drive resource allocation/development in the areas of greatest need to minimize burdens on families and disruptions to family connections. Leadership within the offices and across the county should use this data to inform the need for and distribution of quality resources.
- **Continue supporting the QSR to ensure a mechanism for systematically obtaining and using family and youth feedback.** The QSR is a standard process, used across the nation, for obtaining feedback from children, youth and families about the services they

receive. Collecting information from a QSR process is not enough. The real value in QSRs is a meaningful process for results to be effectively shared with staff and leadership as well as used by offices and leadership to understand, support and adjust practice. Countywide, the aggregate QSR results should be used to look deeper into the institutional features that hinder offices from improving practice performance in a given system area.

- **Develop a supervisory “reflective practice” tool based on the QSR.** Reflective practice has been defined as “the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning.”<sup>20</sup> The QSR is a tool to support system-wide reflection on practice – what is working and what are the areas of improvement. Offices and supervisors, however, do not need to wait for periodic externally conducted QSRs to regularly engage in reflective practice with staff. The information sought in a QSR could be routinely collected by supervisors in regular case consultations with staff. Asking questions similar to the QSR about family and youth well-being and permanency emphasizes what is important in practice and holds supervisors and staff accountable for results as well as offering a learning opportunity. In addition, supervisors and office leadership can explore with staff and family teams the effectiveness of the process being used to encourage “voice and choice” and tracking and making adjustments to family plans and interventions.<sup>21</sup>
- **Build additional mechanisms for obtaining feedback from children and families on the quality of services so that case plans and practice can be adjusted.** Beyond QSRs, other standard processes are needed to obtain feedback from children, youth and family members about the quality of services they receive (whether successful or not). In fact, the current CAPP practice reforms encourage workers to have continuous dialogue with families about how services are working for them. Such timely feedback from families would support an enhanced quality assurance function, as well as allow for necessary and timely troubleshooting when services are not meeting the expected goal for a client. In addition to obtaining timely feedback from families in team meetings, worker visits, phone calls, etc., the county should consider models such as customer satisfaction sur-

veys, focus groups or community cafes to gather additional region-specific concerns about child welfare practice and services offered.<sup>22</sup> Finally, all feedback obtained from families should be widely shared with supervisors, Assistant Regional Administrators, Regional Administrators, and other leaders so they can work with community partners to ensure better quality services are routinely available for families.

### ***Ensure Practitioners Have the Education and Professional Development they Need to Provide Families and Youth with Quality Services and Caregivers Have Opportunities for Knowledge and Skill Building***

- **Implement and evaluate the CAPP cultural humility curriculum.** It is an opportunity for staff to learn methods of inquiry that enhances engagement.
- **In partnership with the union, Los Angeles County should develop a work plan process for ensuring that training results in skill building and improved practice.** Each person’s work plan should provide the opportunity to assess the skills needed for implementation of key elements of the CAPP and county core case practice model and develop action steps for professional development as needed. Work plans should be developed for workers, supervisors and ARAs to ensure that leadership is moving in a practical and substantiated way to build and sustain skills needed. As part of the training work plans, there should be a review of supervisor training needs. This review should be conducted by the training division with participation of the union.
- **Develop child development knowledge building and support opportunities for relative and nonrelatives caregivers alike.** The IA found that caregivers need more information about child development and coaching and skill building on how to respond to child behaviors. This is particularly true for children who have experienced trauma.
- **Attorney training should include many of the same topics offered to social workers and families:** cultural humility, child and adolescent development and parent and child dynamics. Consider conducting joint trainings with social workers so that different perspectives can be heard.

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<sup>20</sup> See Los Angeles County’s Quality Service Review for a Child and Family protocol, Version 2.2, October 2010, developed by Human Services Outcomes, Inc.

<sup>21</sup> See CAPP practice behavior 22.

<sup>22</sup> The Community Cafe concept, part of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework, uses the World Cafe technique to engage parents as leaders and provide an opportunity for dialogue and knowledge-sharing. Parent leaders host a series of guided conversations attended by parents and community partners, including systems/ agencies relevant to the discussion. For more information: [http://www.ctfalliance.org/initiative\\_parents-2.htm](http://www.ctfalliance.org/initiative_parents-2.htm). For general information on Strengthening Families: <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families>.



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## Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services

### Action Plan Summary

~ SEPTEMBER 2012 ~

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The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) vision is that children thrive in safe families and supportive communities. Through the work of a thoughtful strategic planning effort, we have developed a mission, identified key values and set goals to achieve excellence for the children and families of our county. Staff, community partners and stakeholders have contributed to the development of our plan and will be critical in identifying action steps and moving the work forward. It will take the committed and sustained efforts of DCFS along with numerous partners in the sustenance of child safety: other county agencies, local school districts, neighborhoods, law enforcement, hospitals, and service providers. We remain committed to fostering regular communication and collaboration in order to best serve and support children and families in our county.

Our shared Core Practice Model (CPM) in partnership with the Department of Mental Health (DMH) delineates our values in five key practice domains: Engaging, Teaming, Assessing, Planning & Implementing, and Tracking & Adapting. Our vision for shared practice is that children will remain safe and the services and supports put in place are in the families' communities and will build on their strengths. It is built on four elements from a system of care approach: Family Strengths/Child Needs-Based Approach, Multi-Agency Collaboration in the Community, Teaming and Cultural Responsiveness. Additionally, we want to ensure that family voice and choice and identifying underlying needs remain high priorities as we work with children and their families throughout the life of the case. The focus of implementing a cohesive model is on outcomes in the areas of safety, permanence and well-being.

Los Angeles County has already put into place several efforts to address the findings of the analyses: using Child and Family Teams to address families' needs; increased collaboration with community and neighborhood action councils as well as faith based partnerships; addressing trauma in children and families and compassion fatigue in child welfare staff; expanding the use of parent partners and cultural brokers to enhance service delivery; connecting with various school districts to better serve youth in care; increased the collaborative work with the Juvenile Court.

Despite the progress made, there is more work to be done in the coming months and years. In the next several months, DCFS will continue to engage local and statewide community partners to advance the work of improving the system for children and families. Some of the possible ways of making continued progress will involve critically examining our policies and procedures and making recommendations for how to streamline those documents in a way that is most supportive to the work being done. Focused attention on creating caseload equity will be a critical component of supporting practice change for all communities. Additionally, an advisory body will be established as part of the change effort underway that will support the shared Core Practice Model in the county and make recommendations for how to support the agency and the families in the communities. DCFS is also creating curricula that will provide ongoing support for social workers, supervisors and managers to address the secondary trauma that occurs as a result of the challenging work. We are establishing support groups for coaches in the regional offices to address the compassion fatigue associated with this type of work. This topic is being addressed in coaching sessions that are taking place, however more work needs to be done. Part of this includes partnering with local universities and agencies that have expertise and can provide a supportive experience for staff. Another aspect of the work includes connecting with the Deans and Program Directors of the schools of social work in Los Angeles County to ensure that the curriculum being offered prepares students to enter the child welfare field with a solid foundation in best practices.

Los Angeles County hopes that the course we are on will provide a positive example for other child protection agencies across the state and the country. Keeping children connected to their communities in ways that offer protection and support is a priority. Those of us that have the privilege to engage in this work in Los Angeles County will remain committed to addressing the inequities in our system and identifying solutions that will ultimately strengthen all of our communities.

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