

**TESTIMONY OF PATRICIA S. PLOEHN, DIRECTOR  
LOS ANGELES COUNTY  
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES  
TO  
SELECT COMMITTEE ON FOSTER CARE  
AUGUST 8, 2008**

Madam Speaker, Honorable Committee Chair of the Select Committee, Members of the Committee and Justice Moreno:

Good morning, I am Trish Ploehn, Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. I welcome the Committee and your Honor to Los Angeles to hear the “great news” about what we have been able to accomplish in reforming our child welfare and foster care services system over the past 10 years in support of improved outcomes for children and families in Los Angeles County. In 1998, there were nearly 50,000 children living in temporary out-of-home care in Los Angeles County. As of July 31, 2008, we have reduced that number significantly, to less than 18,000 children, the lowest number since the agency was formed in 1984. This reduction has come as a result of a deliberate change in the way we view and implement our child welfare practice and principles. It is based on a commitment to supporting children being raised in safe, stable and permanent homes rather than in temporary foster care because we know that healthy children emerge from healthy families in healthy communities.

The successes we have seen are a direct result of the dedication and very hard work of my agency’s staff and by community stakeholders and philanthropy whom we have very successfully partnered with to make the changes necessary in the way we do the business of child welfare in Los Angeles County, to best serve the needs of children and families.

Los Angeles DCFS is one of the largest public child welfare agencies in the nation, with a budget of \$1.7 billion annually, with over 7,300 employees and a strong commitment to providing quality services to children and families in our diverse communities. Given our size, transforming our system has been an enormous undertaking and I am delighted that you have come to Los Angeles to hear not only about our success, but also the challenges we have both overcome and still face.

While the reforms we have undertaken started nearly 10 years ago, it has been the last 5 years where we have seen these efforts take hold and change our practice, our organizational structure and our relationships with our children, families and communities. We started with re-focusing our efforts on three key outcomes:

- Increased safety for children,
- Improved timelines to permanency (that is, decreasing the time for a child to gain a safe permanent family connection), and a
- Reduced reliance on the use of out-of-home care services.

To achieve these outcomes, we developed five innovative practices and re-directed our staff priorities to provide the support and momentum needed to address urgent needs for children and families. These practices are:

- Use of Structured Decision Making Assessment tools to help guide key decisions during the time we are involved with children and their families;
- Development and implementation of our Point of Engagement Service Delivery Model, which you heard testimony on last Thursday at your hearing and will hear more about this morning;
- Implementation of Team Decision Making conferences, where we bring families and children and everyone important to them to the table to discuss the need for placement and, if at all possible, develop safety plans to allow children to remain safely in their own homes;
- Redesign of our Concurrent Planning services, where upon removal of a child from their family, we actively start to work towards safe reunification while, at the same time, immediately develop a plan for alternate permanency, usually through adoption or guardianship, if safe reunification is not possible; and
- Creation of our Permanency Partners Program, known as "P3" where we have brought back nearly 100 retired social workers to become involved with children and youth, age 12 years and older who have been in foster care for over 2 years, to find family members and other significant people in the youth's life, build family and/or permanent connections and achieve a permanent living arrangement so teens don't continue to grow up in foster care.

Our outcomes as a result of developing these programs have been impressive.

- Safety: We have reduced our recurrence of abuse within 6 months after case closure by 23% from 8.4% to 6.5% of cases over a 4 year period (2002-2006);
- Permanency: We have nearly tripled the percentage of cases where children are adopted within 24 months from 7.6% to 22.9% over a six year period (2002-07);
- We have decreased the median time to reunify children with their parents from 16.8 months in 2002 to 8.3 months in 2007, a 51% decrease;
- While at the same time as reducing the number of children in care from over 27,000 children in 2002 to less than 18,000 children today, we have reduced the median days in placement 611 days...over 20 months.

Well Being/Stability: We have driven dramatic reductions in the number of children placed in group homes (a 40% decrease) and a higher level of placement stability for children and youth while they are placed away from their parents. These outcomes are strongly related to our expanded use of WrapAround services which you will be hearing more about this morning and our expanded use of teamwork problem solving with families.

These improvements have been made despite tremendous challenges. But the biggest obstacle has been the federal child welfare financing structure which funds and rewards systems for keeping children in care and does not fund the effective practices that support the urgent needs of children and families. We knew that without the ability to use dollars flexibly, we would not be able to sustain over time, the tremendous gains we had achieved. One year ago, we entered into the federal Title IV-E Waiver

Demonstration Project which provides us the flexibility to use federal funds to pay for more preventive and intensive treatment services. This flexible funding is a vehicle that allows DCFS to focus on proactive strategies to prevent abuse and neglect and achieve faster, safe reunification when children must be removed. But this is just a 5 year demonstration project, with only 4 years to go and, as you know, it is not without its risks due to the capped allocation of federal funds. In order to sustain the great gains we have made here in LA County, we need a dedicated, reliable and flexible funding stream.

In addition to the IV-E Waiver, Los Angeles County continues to overmatch the state's budgeted allocation to our Department. For example, our Board of Supervisors has invested \$5 million in county funds to support families and children in communities through our Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project about which you will be hearing more this morning. This demonstrates our County's commitment to collaboration and improved services, as there was no requirement, as there is now with the Waiver, for funds to remain dedicated solely to child welfare services. This exciting initiative allows us to work with community partners and to collaborate closely with other county agencies and department's to address the needs of children and families before they become irreversible crisis. But given the pressures of both the State and County budgets, there is no guarantee that the Board of Supervisors will be able to continue this commitment in future years.

I want to stress that although we have achieved great progress in recent years, we know that there is still much to be done. We need to deepen these "best practices" throughout the county so they are the norm in every office and with every social worker and can, therefore, touch and help the lives of every child and family in need

For example, we are very proud that through our new focus on improved outcomes for children and families we have made progress in reducing our social workers' caseloads. But they are still not at an optimal level. Many more children could be helped today if we had the resources to universally adopt reduced caseloads and redirect key staff to support this new approach to serving children and families. Spending more time with the families and children, building and maintaining positive relationships with them and working together through the serious challenges that they are experiencing is critical to ensuring child safety and to achieving and sustaining the results we have seen in recent years.

Additionally, while we have been able to achieve a dramatic reduction in the number of children we supervise in foster care settings, including group homes, we know that those we continue to serve have intense service needs. In line with our Katie A. vs. Los Angeles County lawsuit settlement agreement, we are investing significant county resources in improving our mental health services to children in Los Angeles County. Despite these investments, we still do not have the full system capacity to provide access to the full array of mental health services that our children need and deserve.

Last, I would like to mention that our new practices and programs have been seen by many throughout the country and also here in California as model programs that can perhaps be adopted elsewhere. I know that many of my fellow county directors also have adopted exemplary new practices that are getting positive results for children and families. We have learned much in recent years about what to do and what not to do. Most importantly, we have learned that long term foster care is not a solution and that children aging out of foster care at age 18 are too often at a deficit for navigating the challenges of adulthood and that they too often end up alone, unemployed, homeless or even in jail.

County Welfare Directors and our staff across the state are struggling to take what we know to be promising and successful practices to scale, and to institutionalize those practices as the rule, not the exception, due to the lack of resources. We need these resources in all areas --- prevention/early intervention, for caseload reduction/promising practices, and family/youth well-being. The programs that the Select Committee heard about in Sacramento last week and that you will hear about this morning demonstrate that we know where to go and have built the models that will get us there. However, we really need policy-maker support to implement these practices statewide and that support must include a secure and flexible source of funding.

Our work is not yet done... and we look forward to partnering with you as we continue our efforts to reform the way we deliver services to the children and families of Los Angeles and across the state to achieve the outcomes that every child deserves; the opportunity to grow up safe, physically and emotionally healthy, educated and in permanent families.

Thank you.

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