



Quarterly Child Protection Checkup:
*Assessing the Developmental Health of Child Protection Reform
As Envisioned by the Los Angeles County
Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection*

Introduction

After a spate of bad press centering on child death¹ and the “systemic issues”² plaguing Los Angeles County’s sprawling child welfare and protection system last year, the county’s five-member Board of Supervisors decided to act. They convened³ a Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection (BRC), which spent eight months deliberating over a laundry list of reforms.

Some are more concrete than others, but overall the 42 recommendations provide for a system that should be better at responding to allegations of child maltreatment and helping children once they enter the foster care system.

The problem is that the county’s public administration is immense, and its bureaucracy can grind down the highest-minded of reforms. Soon, two new supervisors will replace those who have termed out, and two more are slated to change over in two years. The county’s chief executive officer⁴ has announced his resignation.

Any chance of seeing the dramatic change envisioned by the BRC will require hyper-vigilance.

In December 2013, the 10-person commission filed an interim report⁵ with a list of recommendations that were all but ignored by the Board of Supervisors.

The commission was so incensed by the lack of action that it laced its final report,⁶ released in April of this year, with hyperbole meant to attract media attention and influence the supervisors to action.

¹ Therolf, Garrett. (May 30, 2013). Signs of boy’s abuse missed by L.A. County Social Workers, *Los Angeles Times*: <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/may/30/local/la-me-0531-child-death-20130530>

² Shek Naamani, A. (April 16, 2012) Report Regarding DCFS Recurring Systemic Issues, Children’s Special Investigative Unit, Board of Supervisors, County of Los Angeles

³ Motion by Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Michael D. Antonovich. (June 18, 2013). Establishing a Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection: <http://ridley-thomas.lacounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Commission-Child-Protection-61113-Final-version-2.pdf>

⁴ Sewell, Abby. (June 28. 2014). Los Angeles County top executive William Fujioka announces retirement, *The Los Angeles Times*: <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-fujioka-retires-county-20140626-story.html>

⁵ Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection. (Dec. 30, 2013). Interim Report: http://ceo.lacounty.gov/pdf/brc/BRCCP_Interim_Report_12_30_13.pdf



"Sustainable reform will require the Board of Supervisors to declare something akin to a STATE of EMERGENCY within the child welfare system, since clearly, the present system presents an existential threat to the safety and protection of our children," the commission wrote.

It worked. The news media ran headlines⁷ decrying this "state of emergency," and two months later, the Board of Supervisors approved⁸ all of the commission's recommendations. This included the creation of an Office of Child Protection, which would be headed by a leader⁹ with the power to alter budgets and staffing decisions across child-serving agencies. By the end of June, the supervisors had named nine members to a "transition team"¹⁰ charged with creating a new child protection czar.

On August 5, 2014, the transition team will present a five-page progress report to the Board of Supervisors, which includes a job description for the Office of Child Protection and describes its role in implementing the BRC's reforms.¹¹

Besides the creation of advisory bodies, designation of roles and public hearings, what has changed for children in Los Angeles County?

Throughout this process, our online news website, *The Chronicle of Social Change*, has, alongside an admirably active Los Angeles press corps, covered the progress of the BRC.

Through our reporting, that of our peers, and a review of the public documents available, we have come to understand to some degree the steps taken towards the commission's goals.

⁶ Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection. (April 18, 2014). The Road to Safety for Our Children, Final Report of the Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection: http://ceo.lacounty.gov/pdf/brc/BRCCP_Final_Report_April_18_2014.pdf

⁷ Villacorte, Christine. (April 10, 2014). Exclusive: Report declares state of emergency for L.A. County's abused, neglected children. *The Los Angeles Daily News*: <http://www.sgvtribune.com/social-affairs/20140410/exclusive-report-declares-state-of-emergency-for-la-countys-abused-neglected-children>

⁸ Therolf, Garret. (June 10, 2014). L.A. County supervisors vote to hire 'child protection czar'. *The Los Angeles Times*: <http://www.latimes.com/local/countygovernment/la-me-foster-reform-20140611-story.html>

⁹ Renick, Christie. (Jan. 22, 2014). A Child Safety Czar for Los Angeles. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/a-child-safety-czar-for-los-angeles/4976>

¹⁰ Loudenback, Jeremy. (June 26, 2014). LA County Board of Supes Names Blue Ribbon Transition Team. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/la-county-board-of-supes-names-blue-ribbon-transition-team/7320>

¹¹ Transition Team for the Office of Child Protection. (July 30, 2014). Report on the progress of the newly established transition team for the office of child protection: <http://file.lacounty.gov/bos/supdocs/87221.pdf>



There has been some movement to increase law enforcement's role in child protection, definite steps toward designating a child protection czar, and concurrent developments that align with the BRC's recommendations on increasing payments to kinship caregivers. But we have not uncovered any evidence that new monies have followed the recommendations, or any concrete assurance that the county will follow through on the myriad child protection improvements approved by the Board of Supervisors.

If child protection reform is viewed in terms of child development, one could say that it is still in its infancy in LA County. While able to swipe at broad concepts with unsure hands, the reform movement as laid out by the BRC is as of now incapable of manipulating its nascent but growing authority with much substance. It's likely too early to know whether or not the reform's development is delayed, but it is clearly not precocious.

Understanding the news media's unique power to impel action, Fostering Media Connections is offering these quarterly checkups in the hopes that they will spur continued attention and nourish the reform effort.

We are not advocating for any BRC recommendations in particular. Instead we have simply organized the commission's suggestions into broader categories, each of which will include a list of related recommendations, any action taken to date and any pertinent information about upcoming opportunities to move change forward.

Our hope is that county leadership, the child protection and child welfare communities, and our colleagues in the news media will use this document to better understand and accelerate the pace of change to improve the lives of vulnerable children.

We accept the checkup's limitations. First, we have only listed those recommendations that we thought imminently actionable and of highest importance. Second, we have focused most of our attention on those recommendations that have seen the most movement. Thus, this enterprise is biased by what we, our sources and the powers that be have designated as important.

It is our collective responsibility to make sure that the BRC recommendations are continually moving forward. Deliberation without progress is too great a cost for the county's children to bear.



Quarterly Checkups

Each category in this checkup includes a text box with the recommendations as written by the BRC, a description of what we understand the category to represent, the progress to date, and any future opportunities for advancement within the category.

The categories of reform and the particular recommendations we tackle in this report are as follows:

I. Consolidation of Authority

The BRC called for an Office of Child Protection to oversee and integrate child-serving agencies around the goal of preventing and responding to child maltreatment, and to promote general child welfare. To accomplish this, the commission first directed the Board of Supervisors to name an “oversight team”¹² to set the parameters for that office. In this section we describe progress toward this end.

The commission also recommended the development of a single system to ensure data sharing among child-serving agencies, and named the county’s Chief Executive Office and the juvenile court to spearhead a countywide confidentiality policy to facilitate the desired data sharing.

II. Maltreatment Prevention and Early Intervention

The BRC called for a more rigorous early intervention system to mitigate the potential for maltreatment after an allegation of abuse is reported to DCFS or law enforcement. It also made recommendations that, while outside the purview of classic child protection, would bolster efforts to prevent maltreatment before it occurs.

On the prevention side, the BRC called on the Department of Public Health and First 5 LA to work together toward a comprehensive prevention plan.

In terms of early intervention, the BRC called for the county to adopt a risk-assessment model developed by Eckerd, a huge private child-welfare service provider based in Florida. Eckerd aggregates information about prior incidences with child protective services and other factors to rate the relative danger to children¹³ to help it gauge risk of future maltreatment.

¹² Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection. (April 18, 2014). The Road to Safety for Our Children, Final Report of the Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection: http://ceo.lacounty.gov/pdf/brc/BRCCP_Final_Report_April_18_2014.pdf

¹³ Florida Dept. of Children and Families. (Jan. 2014). Department of Children and Families to Utilize Evidence-Based Risk Analysis to Protect Florida’s Most Vulnerable. *Press Release*:



The BRC also recommended that the county send public-health nurses out with DCFS (Department of Children and Family Services) investigators on every investigation of an allegation of child maltreatment for children under age 1. In addition, the BRC recommended that all children under age 5 who were “under the supervision of DCFS” should be given priority enrollment in Head Start, Early Head Start and Home Visitation programs.

III. General Health and Children’s Mental Health

The commission called for expanded mental health services for all children and youth involved with the child welfare system. It also directed agencies providing mental health treatment to such children to reduce reliance on pharmacological interventions. Lastly, it prioritized assessing and improving the performance of the county’s seven Medical Hubs, which provide initial assessments of children who are reported as suspected victims of child abuse or neglect and provide comprehensive health care to children in the foster care system.

IV. Workforce & Contracts

Los Angeles County’s child welfare system encompasses much more than the DCFS. Public health nurses, substance-abuse specialists, and a wide array of private providers work in varying degrees of cohesion to support the county’s child protection and child welfare needs. The BRC recommended that the county implement performance-based contracting, which would be based on measures of child well being determined by DCFS and other appropriate agencies.

DCFS social workers regularly deal with caseloads that are well above national standards in many cases, although the county has taken several steps over the past year to alleviate the pressure. Instead of directly calling on the supervisors to hire more caseworkers, the commission recommended the board increase its oversight of DCFS’ strategic plan and ratchet up assessment of caseworker compliance on visiting standards and other measures.

V. Child Placement

California was the last state in the union to routinely pay foster caregivers more than kin caregivers who take in their family members. On June 20, 2014, California Gov. Jerry Brown created a \$30 million fund¹⁴ to help counties pay

<http://www.myflfamilies.com/press-release/department-children-and-families-utilize-evidence-based-risk-analysis-protect-florida>

¹⁴ Step Up Coalition. (June 20, 2014). CA Makes Historic Investment in Foster Children Raised by Relatives. *Step Up Website:* <http://stepupforkin.org/budgetsigned/>



these two critical caregiver groups the same amount of money as part of the 2014-2015 state budget.

Los Angeles County, with a Title IV-E Waiver that allows flexibility in funding, should be able to equalize the stipends to these families today. The BRC made this recommendation in April.

In addition, the BRC latched onto a proposal that died in the state legislature this year, which would have involved foster youth rating and assessing foster care placements.¹⁵

VI. Law Enforcement

A large focus of the BRC was on the role law enforcement agencies play in protecting children. The commission took a close look at the county's Electronic Suspected Child Abuse Reports system, often referred to as E-SCARS,¹⁶ and recommended that all appropriate agencies use the system to its full capacity as well as develop an early warning system for high-risk cases. The BRC also recommended additional mandatory training related to child abuse and E-SCARS for all officers.

¹⁵ Assemblymember Matt Dababneh Fact Sheet for AB 2583. (2014). California Youth Connection website: <http://calyouthconn.org/assets/files/AB%202583%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

¹⁶ Renick, Christie. (Feb. 23, 2014). Los Angeles' Child Abuse Reporting System Underfunded & Underutilized. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/los-angeles-award-winning-child-abuse-reporting-system-underfunded-underutilized/5341>



I. Consolidation of Authority

Why it's important:

After reviewing hours of testimony from caregivers, social workers, public officials, and many others involved in Los Angeles County's child welfare system, the BRC suggested creating a new county office to oversee child safety. The BRC's final report highlighted that responsibility for the safety of children is scattered across many agencies at the county level:

No single entity is held accountable for what happens to at-risk children before, during, and after they are in the County's care. Previous attempts at reform have not been sufficient because no single entity is charged with integrating resources across departments for the benefit of children.

In approving the BRC's recommendations, the Board of Supervisors moved forward with plans to create an Office of Child Protection, with the hopes of increasing coordination, communication, and oversight of the many different child welfare-related agencies and entities in the county. Oversight includes creating a system to measure performance, actively holding various agencies accountable for results and making sure adequate resources are available to ensure the safety of children in Los Angeles County.

Bill Boyarsky of *The Jewish Journal* wrote a column in May questioning whether the Board of Supervisors will provide enough authority to the Office of Child Protection to bypass bureaucratic and political obstacles that have stymied previous attempts at reforming the child welfare system in Los Angeles County.¹⁷

Los Angeles Times editorial writer Robert Greene added that little has changed over the course of 30 years when it comes to child protection.¹⁸ Providing sufficient funding and reorganizing county bureaucracies remain critical—and largely unaddressed—priorities for child protection.

Even as the supervisors approved the new oversight body, Supervisor Don Knabe offered the lone dissenting voice,¹⁹ saying that the new office would create “new layers of unnecessary bureaucracy” for agencies involved in the child welfare system. The

¹⁷ Boyarsky, Bill. (May 28, 2014). L.A.'s disenfranchised kids: *The Jewish Journal*: http://www.jewishjournal.com/bill_boyarsky/item/l.a.s_disenfranchised_kids

¹⁸ Greene, Robert. (May 5, 2014). A 30-year time warp for L.A. County child welfare? *The Los Angeles Times*: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-child-welfare-los-angeles-county-20140502-story.html>

¹⁹ Renick, Christie. (June 11, 2014). Los Angeles Moves on Sweeping Changes in Child Welfare Despite Supe's Vigorous Dissent. *The Chronicle of Social Change*. <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/los-angeles-moves-on-sweeping-changes-in-child-welfare-despite-supes-vigorous-dissent/7069>



Office of Child Protection comes on the heels of other attempts at promoting oversight and coordination of different child-related county agencies. Los Angeles County CEO William T. Fujioka was tasked with a similar mandate to break down silos seven years ago, but the Board of Supervisors limited his powers after little progress had been made, according to an article by Garrett Therolf of the *Los Angeles Times*.²⁰

The county could also look to the state's Child Welfare Council, which has done a good job of convening the state's child welfare leaders but still lacks the authority to put far-ranging reforms into action. Other jurisdictions that have integrated services, such as Shasta County,²¹ could be examined as well.

To accomplish this historic change, the Board of Supervisors is pinning hopes on finding an experienced leader who has a solid understanding of child welfare issues as well as experience leading change in "entrenched organizations."²²

The Office of Child Protection will be helmed by a veritable child protection czar, charged with implementing structural reforms among county departments, identifying and managing funding streams, and adopting strategic goals and plans for child safety across all county systems, according to a preliminary job description released by the Board of Supervisors.²³

Many questions still remain about the board's desire to grant the new official the authority and power to quickly incorporate the commission's reforms. Advocates like Janis Spire, president and CEO of the Alliance for Children's Rights, hope that the director of the Office of Child Protection will be able to successfully navigate the many challenges in Los Angeles County, which is home to the largest number of foster youth of any county in the country.

"It needs to be someone that really gets the complexity of the situation in the county, who is passionate about working for the kids and who is willing and able to stand up to the Board of Supervisors, if necessary," Spire said in an interview.

Count Spire among the interested parties who believe the new director should have some familiarity with Los Angeles County social service providers, community partners and the challenging political landscape.

²⁰ Therolf, Garret. (June 10, 2014). L.A. County supervisors vote to hire 'child protection czar'. The Los Angeles Times: <http://www.latimes.com/local/countygovernment/la-me-foster-reform-20140611-story.html>

²¹ Heimpel, Daniel. (February 9, 2014). Not Your Average Czar. *The Chronicle for Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/analysis/more-than-your-average-czar/5185>

²² Los Angeles Board of Supervisors. (July 8, 2014). Recruitment for Director of Office of Child Protection. Board Correspondence: <http://file.lacounty.gov/bos/supdocs/86911.pdf>

²³ ibid



"For someone coming into Los Angeles, that's a two-year learning curve," she said. "By the time someone gets up to speed, they could be at a disadvantage."

What's happened so far:

On June 24, the Board of Supervisors voted to incorporate the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission into the county's strategic plan for child safety.

The Board of Supervisors also selected a transition team²⁴ to guide the creation of the Office of Child Protection and prioritize the implementation of the BRC's recommendations. The transition team's roles and responsibilities include working with the Board of Supervisors to provide input on the desired qualities and experience of the new director for the Office of Child Protection, prioritizing the BRC's recommendations and reporting back to the board each month, beginning August 5, on the status of the implementation of recommendations and any other progress.

As of the release of this progress report, the transition team had met twice.

At its first meeting, on July 18,²⁵ the transition team's discussion centered on the search for the director of the Office of Child Protection. The transition team has already been working with the Board of Supervisors to create a list of job duties for the new position.²⁶

According to Leslie Gilbert-Lurie, vice chair of the Blue Ribbon Commission and a co-chair of the transition team, the powers and responsibilities of the Office of Child Protection have yet to be outlined in a concrete fashion.

"First and foremost on our plate, in my opinion, should be to work with the supervisors in the search for a director and starting to sketch out a vision for that office," she said in an interview with *The Chronicle of Social Change*. "We were a little bit vague in the report in terms of how large the office should be and in terms of whether they should play a support role to all the other county departments or actually whether they could interfere in any way with the working of any of the agencies or departments."

"We're going to have a little back and forth with the supervisors to figure out the exact parameters of the office. Because any smart director will want to know that before starting the job," said Gilbert-Lurie.

²⁴ Loudenback, Jeremy. (June 26, 2014). LA County Board of Supes Names Blue Ribbon Transition Team. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/la-county-board-of-supes-names-blue-ribbon-transition-team/7320>

²⁵ Loudenback, Jeremy. (July 18, 2014). Transition Team Starts Planning for a New Child Welfare Czar. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/transition-team-starts-planning-for-a-new-child-welfare-czar/7554>

²⁶ Transition Team, Office of Child Protection. (July 8, 2014). Recruitment for Director of Office of Child Protection. *County of Los Angeles, Board of Supervisors*: <http://file.lacounty.gov/bos/supdocs/86911.pdf>



What's next:

At its most recent meeting, the transition team met with executive-recruitment consultant Mark Oppenheim to organize a search for a new director.²⁷ Outlining the powers of the new child protection czar will be key to attracting desirable candidates.

"Is this a coordinating job? Do I have any authority? Am I oversight?" asked transition team member Patricia Curry during the July 28 meeting. "Any good candidate's going to ask those questions, and I don't want to lose potentially good candidates by not having good answers for them."

The transition team will present a finalized description²⁸ of the director of the Office of Child Protection position in its report to the Board of Supervisors on August 5 and a clarified description of the roles and responsibilities of the transition team. The team is also expected to request that the board allow it to interview qualified candidates as part of the screening process for the position.

It is still unclear when the transition team will clarify how it will begin to prioritize and implement the BRC recommendations as well as the structure of the monthly reports to the board.

The office of the Los Angeles County CEO is working to create a matrix of the recommendations for the next meeting of the transition team on August 22 and will supply the team with monthly updates on the related work of county departments. The transition team will also begin hearing presentations from members of county departments about progress on specific recommendations, starting with the members of the county's working group on Medical Hubs at the next meeting.

²⁷ Loudenback, Jeremy. (July 29, 2014). Transition Team Considers Powers of New Child Welfare Czar. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/transition-team-considers-powers-of-new-child-welfare-czar/7690>

²⁸ Transition Team For the Office of Child Protection. (2014). Report On The Progress Of The Newly Established Transition Team For The Office Of Child Protection, Correspondence of the Transition Team: <http://file.lacounty.gov/bos/supdocs/87221.pdf>.



BRC Recommendations: Consolidation of Authority

- Establish an entity to oversee one unified child protection system.
- Establish an oversight team to ensure implementation of recommendations. Initially, the Oversight Team had the following three tasks:
 - Oversee implementation of the Commission's recommendations upon adoption by the Board.
 - In collaboration with the Board, identify the services currently provided by the Departments of Health Services, Children and Family Services, Public Health, Probation, Mental Health, Public Social Services, First 5 LA, the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), the Domestic Violence Council, and the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles deemed as crucial to ensuring child safety. The accompanying budget and staff resources also should be identified.
 - The Oversight Team must develop a dashboard to provide monthly reports to the Board.
- Define measures of success and oversee the reform process.

II. Maltreatment Prevention and Early Intervention

Why it's important:

The BRC identified the lack of prevention services as one of the most pressing child-welfare issues in Los Angeles County. The commission's final report states that "inadequate attention has been given to prevention services. Currently, services typically do not begin until a child or family has contact with the child welfare system."

The BRC's recommendations call for "programs that stop child maltreatment before it starts" and suggest that "the lack of available prevention and early intervention services has contributed to the highest caseload since 2007."

According to the Center for Disease Control's "Understanding Child Maltreatment Fact Sheet," child maltreatment includes all types of abuse and neglect of a child under the age of 18 by a parent, caregiver or another person in a custodial role.

"The ultimate goal is to stop child maltreatment before it starts. Strategies that promote safe, stable, and nurturing relationships (SSNRs) and environments for children and families are key to protecting against maltreatment and other harmful childhood experiences. These prevention strategies include improving parent-child relationships by teaching positive parenting skills like good



communication, appropriate discipline, and response to children's physical and emotional needs. Programs to prevent child maltreatment also provide parents with social support.²⁹

Maltreatment prevention and intervention are two distinct concepts that target two different populations.

"I view child maltreatment prevention as efforts to prevent children from being harmed in the first place," said West Virginia University researcher Cheryl McNeil in an email to *The Chronicle of Social Change*. McNeil's research has focused on childhood disruptive behavior problems and parent-child interactions. "In contrast, child maltreatment intervention involves treatment strategies provided once children already have been harmed that are designed to prevent recidivism and allow children to have a safe and healthy future."

What's happened so far:

An internal memo from the Board of Supervisors in late July that outlined the role and responsibilities of the transition team called for "immediate implementation" of the deployment of public health nurses with county social workers in child maltreatment investigations for children younger than a year old and the greater use of public nurses as part of a revamped early intervention effort.³⁰

What's next:

In an upcoming meeting, the transition team is expected to hear from members of the DHS, DCFS and DPH about creating a more robust role for public health nurses in the investigative process..

²⁹ National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention. (2014). Understanding Child Maltreatment: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/understanding-cm-factsheet.pdf>

³⁰ Board of Supervisors. (July 28, 2014). Office of Child Protection – Transition Team Roles and Responsibilities: <http://file.lacounty.gov/bos/supdocs/87080.pdf>



BRC Recommendations: Maltreatment Prevention & Early Intervention

- The Board should direct DPH and First 5 LA to jointly develop a comprehensive prevention plan to reduce the overall incidence of child abuse and neglect.
- The County can measurably and immediately improve child safety by requiring all departments to target resources and high quality services, including prevention services, toward children under the age of five.
- The County should increase access to early intervention services for foster children and children at high risk of abuse and neglect. All children under the supervision of DCFS between 0-5 should be prioritized for access to Early Childhood Education learning programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, and Home Visitation. These programs should be funded and well marketed. Once placed in a program, children should be permitted to remain enrolled until they start kindergarten.

III. General Health and Mental Health

Why it's important:

"General and mental health" refers to services related to the physical and psychological well-being of children. Medical issues or developmental problems may often be important signs of child abuse and neglect. Without better medical care or examination, children in Los Angeles County may be at risk of further maltreatment, injury or other tragic outcomes.

A major part of the county's strategy to improve health care and examinations to children in foster care are its seven Medical Hubs clinics. Children reported to DCFS go through a "minimally invasive screening process" at these hubs. Medical Hubs are part of a program that offers comprehensive medical and mental health screenings and forensic evaluations for both children in foster care and those at risk of detention. The Medical Hubs concept was created as a collaboration among DCFS, the Department of Mental Health, and Department of Health Services. However, insufficient resources have prevented wider use of the hubs across the county.

What's happened so far:

When he voted to approve the BRC's recommendations along with three of his colleagues on June 10, Supervisor Michael Antonovich cited the need to bolster the medical resources available to foster children at the High Desert Regional Health Center in Lancaster:



"Sometimes it takes a month to get an appointment [at a Medical Hub]," Antonovich said at the June 10 Board of Supervisors meeting.³¹ "Four weeks. Parts of the county of Los Angeles do not have pediatricians in their hub...I know in Antelope Valley, they do not have a full-time pediatrician. And I would like to have a report on how we improve those Medical Hubs and reduce that wait time of a month."

That center is one of seven Medical Hubs (six of which are public) in the county. The Board of Supervisors plans to designate the hub to offer expert medical opinions in investigations of child maltreatment as well as to improve health care for all children in the child welfare system.

At the same time, a new work group is being formed³² by converging two previously separate entities, the Public Health Nurse Work Group and the Medical Hub Work Group. The combined work group is being tasked with developing a comprehensive service-delivery model.

What's next:

The transition team is expected to explore increasing funding for the six public Medical Hubs as well as prioritize the role of public health nurses in the investigative process.

³¹ Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. (June 10, 2014). The Meeting Transcript of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors://file.lacounty.gov/bos/transcripts/06-10-14%20Board%20Meeting%20Transcript%20(C).pdf

³² Los Angeles County Medical Hub Work Group. (July 2014). Los Angeles County Medical Hub Clinics: <http://file.lacounty.gov/bos/supdocs/87082.pdf>.



BRC Recommendations: General & Mental Health

- Ensure access to high quality and consistent mental health services for all those involved in the child welfare system, and prioritize non-pharmacological interventions for children.
- Assessments should be conducted to identify each Hub's strengths and weaknesses. Strategies should be devised to meet the needs in each geographic area. The Violence Intervention Program at LAC+USC Medical Center is the most comprehensive Hub that is closest to meeting articulated goals and has the greatest ability to conduct a neutral assessment.
- All children entering placement and children under age one whose cases are investigated by DCFS should be screened at a Medical Hub. Children placed in out-of-home care or served by DCFS in their homes should have ongoing health care provided by physicians at the Medical Hubs.
- A Public Health Nurse should be paired with a DCFS social worker in child abuse or neglect investigations of all children from birth to at least age one.
- DPH's evidence-based home visit service should be made available to all children under age one who are seen at a Medical Hub.
- The Board should issue a clear mandate that non-pharmacological interventions are best practice with children wherever feasible. The Board should work with the Juvenile Court to fully implement and measure compliance with this mandate.
- As part of performance-based contracting, mental health treatments for teens and transitioning youth must incorporate trauma-focused assessment and treatments, developmental status, ethnicity, sexual identity, and vulnerability to self-harming behaviors.
- Children age five and under in the child welfare system must have access to age-appropriate mental health services.

IV. Workforce & Contracts

Why it's important:

In December 2013, Los Angeles County social workers went on strike³³ to protest high caseloads and fight for the hiring of more social workers.³⁴ The first strike in more than 10 years by social workers exposed the difficult conditions faced by DCFS caseworkers.

³³ Heimpel, Daniel. (Sept. 23, 2013). Los Angeles Social Workers Plan Walkout. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/los-angeles-social-workers-plan-walkout/4010>

³⁴ Mehta, Seema & Sewell, Abby. (December 5, 2013). County social workers strike over pay, high caseloads. *Los Angeles Times*: <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-social-worker-strike-20131205-story.html>



Frequently overwhelmed with heavy caseloads well above the federal and state recommended limits,³⁵ caseworkers are often prevented from offering quality service to children in the child welfare system. In Los Angeles County, social workers often contend with caseloads of more than 30 per month; national guidelines suggest that a normal caseload is 12 active cases a month.^{36,37} And lawyers for children in the county's Juvenile Dependency Court are also burdened by dramatically oversized caseloads that impact their ability to offer sufficient services to their clients.³⁸

The 2012 Recurring Systemic Issues Report³⁹ that describes 15 serious incidents, including 14 child deaths, as well as feedback provided to the BRC by a variety of stakeholders in the community, demonstrated that social workers and other front-end caseworkers in the system are in need of further training. In particular, the BRC's report suggested specific training be given to social workers working with children aged 0 to 5. The report also referenced opportunities for continued learning for DCFS social workers and administrators.

The creation and implementation of a wider set of outcome measures and benchmarks that would reflect the performance of caseworkers is also being encouraged. For example, the county could consider tracking the frequency of missed meetings among its social workers.

What's happened so far:

The 2013 strike by social workers was short-lived, but shortly thereafter the Board of Supervisors voted to approve the hiring of 450 new social workers,⁴⁰ which included an additional 50 after the release of the BRC's final report.⁴¹

³⁵ Loudenback, Jeremy. (June 24, 2014). LA County Approves Funding To Hire More Social Workers. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/la-county-approves-funding-to-hire-more-social-workers/7299>

³⁶ Child Welfare League of America. Guidelines for Computing Caseload Standards: <http://www.cwla.org/programs/standards/caseloadstandards.htm>

³⁷ American Humane Association. (2000). SB 2030
Child Welfare Services Workload Study Final Report:
<http://www.cwda.org/downloads/publications/cws/SB2030Study.pdf>

³⁸ Loudenback, Jeremy. (June 18, 2014). California Rejects Bid to Restore Funding for Child Welfare Courts. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/la-county-approves-funding-to-hire-more-social-workers/7299>

³⁹ Shek Naamani, A. (April 16, 2012) Report Regarding DCFS Recurring Systemic Issues, Children's Special Investigative Unit, Board of Supervisors, County of Los Angeles

⁴⁰ Villacorte, Christina. (February 3, 2014). Department of Children and Family Services to offer plan to lower caseloads, better protect kids. *Los Angeles Daily News*: <http://www.dailynews.com/government-and-politics/20140203/department-of-children-and-family-services-to-offer-plan-to-lower-caseloads-better-protect-kids>



What's next:

The transition team is expected to discuss caseloads and training for social workers. David Green, a DCFS social worker involved with SEIU Local 721, says that despite the progress in setting aside funds for more social workers, the county must continue to add caseworkers.

"We've made some great progress about hiring social workers, but you can't stop at 450 social workers if we really want to lower caseloads in a sustainable way," Green said in an interview with *The Chronicle of Social Change*.

DCFS needs 1,600 social workers to bring DCFS caseloads down to "an optimal level," according to a blog post written by Green.⁴² The cost of hiring the social workers could come to \$160 million.

Green also said that DCFS is currently meeting with some social workers on a caseload equity panel to explore ways to reduce caseloads and ensure that social workers at different DCFS offices receive more equal caseloads.

BRC Recommendations: Workforce & Contracts

- Departments and agencies closely involved in the identification, prevention, protection, and treatment of at-risk children should be mandated to participate in cross-training with DCFS employees. At a minimum, this interdisciplinary approach should include law enforcement, the Department of Mental Health (DMH), DHS, DPH, the Dependency Court, and the Probation Department. Entities that could help create appropriate cross-training models include the UCCF, the District Attorney's Office, and ICAN.
- DCFS, DMH, and DHS should train personnel, both in-house and in contract agencies, on how to most effectively work with the age 0 to 5 population, their families, and caretakers.
- DCFS should create an innovative, open and adaptive training process for social workers and their supervisors that consists of a continuous learning environment, with training and research, akin to a teaching hospital. It should also conduct a job audit of social workers to determine what can be done differently or by others to address social worker workload.
- Performance-based contracting on agreed-upon outcome measures by DCFS, other appropriate departments and the contracting agencies for children and families should be adopted, rewarding contracting agencies that achieve better results for the children they serve.

⁴¹ Loudenback, Jeremy. (June 18, 2014). California Rejects Bid to Restore Funding for Child Welfare Courts. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/la-county-approves-funding-to-hire-more-social-workers/7299>

⁴² Green, David. (April 28, 2014). LA County Social Workers Respond to Blue Ribbon Report. SEIU 721 blog post: <https://www.seiu721.org/2014/04/la-county-social-workers-respond-to-blue.php>



V. Child Placement

Why it's important:

Social workers frequently struggle to find adequate placements for children, spending hours making phone calls or otherwise looking for beds⁴³.

According to the BRC's report, as of March 2014, the number of children in out-of-home placement was 20,676, an increase of 1,257 from the previous year. The most recent available statistics indicate that there are 3,000 FFA-certified homes with 7,013 beds and 584 DCFS-recruited homes with 1,753 beds.

In short, there are too few beds, and locating those beds is an inefficient process that takes workers away from other equally important tasks.

What's happened so far:

In Los Angeles County, thousands of at-risk children are placed with relatives or kinship caregivers, but funding and other critical sources of support have often been denied.⁴⁴ Many kinship caregivers receive about \$500 less per foster child per month than nonrelative caregivers. On June 20, California Gov. Jerry Brown signed the 2014 – 2015 California budget, which included a historic raft of state funding for kin caregivers at the county level.⁴⁵ The new budget includes \$30 million to cover the disparity in funding faced by many kin caregivers, but other obstacles to equity remain for the caregivers who are considered a “backbone” of the foster care system.

“When there’s kids in the homes of relatives, they would get no foster care benefits whatsoever and they would have to get CALWORKS,” said Angie Schwartz, a policy director at the Alliance for Children’s Rights who has been active in advocating for kinship caregivers at the state level. “But it’s not full parity because it doesn’t include specialized care increments, clothing allowances or dual agency rates or some of the things that [children in the foster care system] would get if they were with a nonrelative or federally eligible.”

DCFS declined to comment on any placement-related activities.

⁴³ Ling, Lisa. (July 3, 2014). Children of the System. Our America with Lisa Ling, *The Oprah Winfrey Network*: <http://www.oprah.com/own-our-america-lisa-ling/Children-of-the-System>

⁴⁴ *Los Angeles Times* Editorial Board. (April 15, 2014). Helping relatives help children. *Los Angeles Times*: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-kinship-20140415-story.html>

⁴⁵ Valle, Victor. (June 20, 2014). Calif. Governor Signs off on Kinship Equity, Support for Exploitation Victims. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/funding-for-kinship-equity-support-for-exploitation-victims-makes-way-to-governor/7241>



What's next:

Los Angeles County must indicate by October 1 whether or not it will opt in to access Brown's funding plan for the coming year. The transition team and the Board of Supervisors will also be tasked with finding other funding streams, such Title IV-E Waiver dollars, to ensure that kinship caregivers are provided a full range of services as well as commensurate support from social workers.

BRC Recommendations: Child Placement

- The County and DCFS should utilize its Title IV-E waiver dollars to ensure parity of funding for children placed with kin to that of children placed in foster family settings
- The County, through the auditor controller and the CEO, should review the current mix of county licensing and supports for foster homes and approval and supports for kin, to assess the inconsistent performance and resource allocation, and to determine whether a more uniform streamlined system would be more effective. The Commission believes consideration of contracting out this process is warranted.
- The Board should call for an independent analysis of non-relative foster family recruitment efforts in the County to determine how the system can be more efficient and effective. The analysis should use sound data to address a range of questions, including whether there are safe and appropriate homes in each SPA to meet the needs of foster youth.
- DCFS should develop a computerized, real-time system to identify available and appropriate placements based on the specific needs of the child.
- DCFS should involve foster youth in the rating and assessment of foster homes.

VI. Law Enforcement

Why it's important:

Although DCFS is typically thought of as the first responder to reports of child abuse, law enforcement plays a substantial role. In 2013, Los Angeles County's 46 law enforcement agencies received 52,109 reports of child maltreatment from DCFS and sent officers to investigate on nearly 80 percent of cases, according to data from the Office of the Los Angeles County District Attorney obtained by *The Chronicle of Social Change*.⁴⁶

However, within those figures, there remains a high degree of variation for law enforcement agencies across the county. For the Los Angeles County Sheriff's

⁴⁶ Heimpel, Daniel. (May 8, 2014). New "Explosive" Figures on Law Enforcement Response to Child Abuse in LA County. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/analysis/rolling-the-dice-on-child-abuse-in-long-beach-la-county/6517>



Department, 97 percent of child maltreatment cases were investigated. For other law enforcement agencies in Inglewood, Long Beach and La Verne, rates of in-person investigation were far lower, exposing wide variations in the way child abuse and neglect is addressed across the county.

"What we need is a change in philosophy," said Tom Sirkel, who retired as operations and training lieutenant of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Special Victims Bureau after 39 years in the organization. "Law enforcement agencies shouldn't get to choose which cases they go out to. Like the Sheriff's Department, they need to roll out to every call."⁴⁷

Sirkel and others have suggested that the way in which allegations of child maltreatment are investigated should be rethought. Currently, some law-enforcement departments only give allegations immediate attention and an in-person visit when the allegations are perceived to have risen to the level of a crime.

To increase communication between DCFS and law enforcement agencies, the District Attorney's office launched the Electronic Suspected Child Abuse Reporting System (E-SCARS) in 2009.⁴⁸ This real-time, web-based system is designed to provide information about child abuse and neglect cases. However, critical issues relating to oversight, resourcing and training have emerged in the implementation of E-SCARS across the county.

Providing oversight for E-SCARS from the Los Angeles County District's Attorney Office is a critical need, yet funding issues have hampered its operations.

A February article in *The Chronicle of Social Change*⁴⁹ highlighted the lack of money available from an original \$2 million grant from the Los Angeles County Quality and Productivity Commission for system maintenance and upgrades related to E-SCARS.

"My understanding is that the money is all gone," said Mike Gargiulo, assistant head of the DA's Family Violence Division in a phone interview in February. "There's going to have to be a request by one of the departments or all of us together to go to the Board to ask for more money."

In April 2014, the District Attorney's office published a report that showed how law enforcement agencies investigated reports of suspected abuse in the E-SCARS system.

⁴⁷ Loudenback, Jeremy. (July 15, 2014). Long Beach Backs Child Abuse Investigation Policies. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/long-beach-backs-child-abuse-investigation-policies/7503>

⁴⁸ Renick, Christie. (Feb. 23, 2014). Los Angeles' Child Abuse Reporting System Underfunded & Underutilized. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/los-angeles-award-winning-child-abuse-reporting-system-underfunded-underutilized/5341>

⁴⁹ Ibid



The report prompted a June audit of E-SCARS policies in Long Beach that brought attention to the police department's methods for investigating allegations of child maltreatment and the role of the District Attorney's office in providing oversight.⁵⁰

After distributing the report in April, DA Jackie Lacey requested additional funding from the Board of Supervisors for three paralegals and a deputy district attorney to bolster oversight of the E-SCARS system as part of a response to the BRC's work.⁵¹ Her letter to the Board of Supervisors, which is appended to the BRC report, calls for an E-SCARS unit to be established in the DA's office. A deputy district attorney would be responsible for E-SCARS oversight as well as increased training for law enforcement agencies. While no funding was made available in the 2014-2015 county budget for the new unit, the transition team is expected to weigh in on the request for funding.

What's next:

The transition team will consider how to improve the way suspected cases of child abuse and neglect are reported and encourage mandating the cross-reporting of all suspected cases in a law-enforcement log (a recommendation that has already been adopted by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department). The possibility of implementing an early warning system to alert agencies about potential high-risk allegations could also be part of the discussion.

Transition team member and former Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley will be closely monitoring progress on improving E-SCARS for good reason. It was under his administration of the DA's office that the system was first implemented in 2009.

"The D.A.'s office is a really important part of the process of child protection, and I had 39 years and 10 months in that organization," Cooley said in an interview with *The Chronicle of Social Change*. "I want to make sure that it's working optimally for the various responsible agencies."

⁵⁰ Loudenback, Jeremy. (July 15, 2014). Long Beach Backs Child Abuse Investigation Policies. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/long-beach-backs-child-abuse-investigation-policies/7503>

⁵¹ Heimpel, Daniel. (April 15, 2014). An Early Win for LA's Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection. *The Chronicle of Social Change*: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/news/three-paralegals-and-a-deputy-da/6182>



BRC Recommendations: Law Enforcement

- All Sheriff's deputies and local law enforcement agencies within the County of Los Angeles must cross-report every child abuse allegation to DCFS, as required by State law. In addition, it should be documented that a cross-report was made, for example, in a police report or law enforcement log. LASD reports that it has implemented this recommendation. The DA's Office should work with other law enforcement agencies to do the same and review the success of LASD's implementation efforts.
- E-SCARS should be utilized fully by all relevant agencies and receive the necessary support to be well-maintained and enhanced.
- The DA's Office should increase its oversight of the law enforcement response and sharing of information, including cross-reporting between DCFS and law enforcement agencies, to ensure that each agency carries out its mandated investigative response. Since our Interim Report, the DA's Office has proposed establishing an E-SCARS Unit to facilitate needed improvements by all law enforcement entities in the County in responding to child abuse and neglect reports. The Commission supports funding this Unit. See Appendix 5 for the Los Angeles County District Attorney's description of its proposed E-SCARS Unit.
- Training of all levels of law enforcement must be enhanced to include: sufficient initial and recurrent training on child abuse and E-SCARS; "lessons learned" from important case reviews; cross-training with social work, mental health, and other relevant personnel; and additional training on responding to domestic violence calls and identifying instances of abuse that may be occurring in group homes, including sex trafficking exploitation which victimizes a high percentage of foster care youth.
- The County should develop an early warning system within E-SCARS to alert DCFS and law enforcement of high-risk allegations of abuse as early as possible. A convergence of high-risk factors would alert supervisors of high-risk situations and allow them to take appropriate action.



Conclusion

The purpose of this quarterly checkup is to assess the health of the child protection reform effort in Los Angeles County.

In the 90 days since the dissolution of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection, county leaders have given weight to the work conducted by the BRC by voting to implement the commission's recommendations and by creating a transition team to help implement its ideas. Beyond that, however, it does not appear that many concrete objectives have been identified, assigned or allocated resources.

Los Angeles County's Department of Children and Family Services fields more than 150,000 allegations of child abuse a year, oversees the cases of 30,000 families whose children have been victims of substantiated abuse and takes care of 15,000 children who have been removed from their biological parents. It is the largest child welfare system in the world.

There has been a sincere effort to assess DCFS and the larger child welfare system's strengths and weaknesses, and a clear path to achieve better outcomes for children has been delineated. This is not the first effort of its kind, and it likely will not be the last.

At the transition team meeting on July 28, transition team member Patricia Curry, who has also served on the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families since 1995, was emphatic about the change prescribed by the BRC.

"I hope that we can do this and move things along quickly," Curry said. "The Blue Ribbon [Commission] was clear about the need to makes changes today."

In this window of time, the county – its public officials, private child welfare providers, advocates, journalists and charitable foundations – have a chance to focus their attention on ensuring that the work conducted by this Blue Ribbon Commission makes a difference in the lives of the children of Los Angeles County.

The second quarterly checkup will be issued in October 2014. We welcome feedback and ideas about where we should direct our attention for the next edition.

We can be reached at info@fosteringmediaconnections.org or 415-416-6187.