



# Los Angeles Looks to Expand Program to Get High-Needs Foster Youth Out of Shelters and Into Homes

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🕒 March 10, 2020    👤 Sara Tiano



**The L.A. County Office of Child Protection pilot targets foster youth who wind up staying long-term in shelters meant for short-term transitional stays. Photo: Shutterstock**

**Jacqueline\* was 13** when she first entered the Los Angeles foster care system in March 2015. She had severe mental health issues, and her mother couldn't give her the high-level care she needed at home. She went into specialized, treatment-based group care, but she couldn't find stability, bouncing through eight different treatment centers in five years before ending up in a transitional shelter.

At the shelter, Jacqueline was recruited in 2019 by the county's Office of Child Protection (OCP) to participate in a pilot project designed to help high-needs foster youth like her find and stay in a long-term foster home. The pilot provides a specialized team of social workers and mental health providers led by a case coordinator who is available 24/7 to support the youth and caregivers.

Jacqueline was placed in a foster home and flourished there for several months, but when she began to display the kind of severe behavioral issues that often shake up a stable placement, her team was there. In a moment of crisis, her case coordinator headed straight to Jacqueline's foster home and stayed on the phone with her until he got there. Once he arrived, he was able to walk with the teen to a nearby park to calm down and discuss what she needed to feel more stable.

In a short time, Jacqueline’s challenging behaviors decreased, and her caregiver said the team support made her feel like she could weather any challenge without having to ask to have Jacqueline move to a different home, according to Jason James-Scribner, the case coordinator.

“[Jacqueline] learned that she doesn’t need to earn a place in a home,” James-Scribner said at a January 13 meeting of the county’s Commission for Children and Families. “She’s learning to trust that people care about her regardless of her behavior. She’s not just what she does.”

Now, more than three years after this pilot launched, Los Angeles County leaders are looking for ways to expand the program to help an estimated 900 high-needs foster youth like Jacqueline in the county.

## **Long Stays at Shelters A Longstanding Problem**

The pilot was launched in 2016, in response to L.A.’s decades-long struggle to streamline entries into foster care and placement changes. In 2003, [the county-run shelter Maclaren Children’s Center closed amid criticisms](#) that it had become a dumping ground for children suffering mental illnesses and other hard-to-place foster youth. Intended as a place for children to stay a few days while other arrangements were made, kids ended up living there for months at a time.

Following Maclaren’s closure, kids were staying overnight in social workers’ offices at the county Department of Children and Family Services’ 24-hour command post. In 2012, two “Welcome Centers” opened as daylong waiting rooms, but [those closed just three years later](#). Youth were regularly staying beyond a 24-hour limit, and the state Department of Social Services sued the county. In their place, the 72-hour transitional shelters were established across the county.

But the shelters “could not in themselves address the underlying issues: high needs of the children and youth, lack of

sufficient foster homes, need for support to caregivers and youth to make lasting connections,” the [OCP report](#) says.

That’s where the pilot comes in. It targets the youth overstaying the 72-hour limit in shelters, or who are at-risk to do so based on a recent history of multiple placement changes or hospitalization, along with folks who exhibit high-level behavioral or mental health struggles, have been commercially sexually exploited, or are at-risk of justice system involvement.

“Each of the young people included in the project is essentially a walking emergency,” OCP director Judge Michael Nash said [in a report on the pilot](#).

Seventy of the county’s 18,000 youth in care have been served by the program so far, but according to [an OCP report](#), 900 foster youth in the county could be eligible for the pilot’s services based on their level of needs and history of churning through placements.

## **“High-Touch” Care for High-Needs Youth**

Once a young person agrees to be involved in the pilot, their DCFS caseworkers team up with a pilot social worker, called “case coordinators,” and mental health providers, who work together to find an appropriate placement, help the young person make that transition, and provide ongoing support to both the youth and caregiver to help stabilize the new situation into a long-term arrangement.

Case coordinators are responsible for just eight foster youth at a time — a third of the average caseloads managed by DCFS social workers. While DCFS social workers visit youth twice a month, case coordinators spend four to five hours a day on new cases. Once the young person has settled in, the case coordinator visits each client at their new home at least once a week until their case is closed, which happens based on an individual and consensual assessment of readiness.

“These kids likely don’t have an attachment” to a supportive adult, James-Scribner said during a presentation to the

Children's Commission on Jan. 13. "That's the crux of our rapport. We build that attachment."

The outcome data, while limited, underlines the impact of the pilot's high-level case management. DCFS studied the amount of time participants spent in appropriate placements and shelters, both before and during the pilot. The average length of placement shot up from 69 to 121 days, and the number of hours spent in shelters was cut nearly in half.

## Looking Forward

On Feb. 12, the county's Commission for Children and Families sent a [request](#) to the Board of Supervisors proposing a rigorous evaluation of the "anecdotally life-changing" project, as Commissioner Wendy Smith calls it, to see what it would cost to provide the high-level services to more young people in need.

The cost of growing the program is unclear, according to Smith and Ross, because the pilot was developed based on a reallocation of existing staff rather than a separate budget. With eight full-time social workers serving as case coordinators, the program has a maximum capacity of serving 64 youth at any one time.

Ross would like to see the program grow, but within limits in order to protect the vision and quality of the program. His ideal expansion includes 10 more case coordinators and an additional supervisor, which would allow them to serve around 144 kids.

"I need to know that my supervisors are sharing the same vision," Ross said. If the program gets too big and far-reaching, he said, "I think it would be very easy to lose that vision."

James-Scribner said that while further research on the program would be valuable, numbers don't tell the whole story.

“Love kind of requires some waste,” he said at the Jan. 13 Children’s Commission meeting. “And these kids sometimes don’t feel a lot of love when our system is measured in numbers.”

*\*Name has been changed to protect the young person’s privacy.*



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General assignment reporter for The Chronicle of Social Change