

Los Angeles County Expands Kinship Care Efforts

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By Jeremy Loudenback



Photo by Dominique Ross

On Tuesday, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to expand a program that has helped drive kinship placements of children in its foster care system to nearly twice the national average.

Now in use at 10 Department of Children and Family Services offices, the Upfront Family Finding Pilot Project has helped to place about 60% of foster children with relatives in their first placement after entering foster care, reducing the trauma of children recently removed from their parents' homes.

As a result of the supervisors' action, the program will be rolled out to all 19 Department of Children and Family Services offices, with county officials to provide a funding plan and timeline in the months ahead.

“Expanding this successful pilot aligns with the county’s long-standing commitment to integrate a strength-based, family-focused and trauma-informed practice to better serve our families and communities,” said Supervisor Hilda Solis, who co-authored the motion with Supervisor Holly Mitchell.

The Upfront Family Finding pilot started at two offices in 2016 with the goal of creating an alternative to placing children in foster homes with strangers or in residential facilities. Under the program, retired and part-time social workers seek relatives within the first 90 days of children’s entry into foster care. Their efforts are aimed at increasing relative placements and engaging more relatives to provide support. These specialized workers search online databases and interview relatives to create more family connections for youth.

California law says foster youth should be placed with relatives and family friends whenever possible, but only 33% of children in the state’s foster care system live with relatives, a number that mirrors recent national statistics.

In arguing for the expansion of the program, Michael Nash, director of the Office of Child Protection and the architect of the Upfront Family Finding Pilot Project, said relatives provide not only a familiar face during a difficult transition time but also greater support after children age out of the foster care system.

“Study after study shows that kids are better off with family members in so many different ways,” Nash said in an interview with The Imprint. From reducing the trauma to creating a sense of belonging while in care, placements with kin “have an impact on the long-term health outcomes for children.”

Los Angeles County currently places about 49% of foster children with relatives, but an evaluation by Child Trends found that relative placements have shot up as a result of the family finding pilot program. Since 2016, offices that have employed Upfront Family Finding have pushed that rate to about 60%. A full evaluation, including the impact of relative placements on parent-child reunifications, is expected next month.

Nash, a former presiding judge of the juvenile court, said that Los Angeles County has also helped to boost the rate of placement with kin by guaranteeing relatives financial support at the time children enter their homes, as well as by dispelling biases that have hobbled kinship living arrangements in the past.

“Too many places take the attitude of ‘Well, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree — the parents have issues, so relatives must have those issues, too,’” he said. “That’s just the wrong approach.”

The motion to expand the program passed by the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday also instructs the Department of Children and Family Services to report back to the board on a quarterly basis about the progress, and to explore extending the same model to youth in the

juvenile justice system.

About the Author

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