

**Stories of Prevention
in Los Angeles County:**

**DCFS and Community
Agencies Join Hands To
Support Families and Children**



The Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project

July 2009



Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve – and ultimately prevent the need for – foster care. Established by UPS founder Jim Casey in 1966, the foundation provides direct services and promotes advances in child welfare practice and policy. Casey Family Programs' goal nationally is to increase the safety and well-being of children by strengthening families and finding permanent families for children in foster care. The foundation believes those goals can be achieved by safely reducing the foster care population by 50 percent by the year 2020 and reinvesting the resulting savings in systems improvement.

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“Stories of Prevention” is one in a series of documents supported by Casey Family Programs to chronicle child welfare reform in Los Angeles County. A previous report – “Stories of Practice Change: What Flexible Funding Means to the Children and Families of Los Angeles County” – focuses on strategies implemented by DCFS as part of a federal Title IV-E waiver that authorized the county to spend its foster care funds flexibly. Casey Family Programs is also publishing a formal evaluation of the Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project, which will be completed later this summer.

Reports are available on the Casey Family Programs' Web site: www.casey.org.

About the Author

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First in the heart is the dream —

Then the mind starts seeking a way

.....

The eyes see there materials for building,

See the difficulties, too, and the obstacles.

The mind seeks a way to overcome these obstacles.

The hand seeks tools to cut the wood,

To till the soil, and harness the power of the waters.

Then the hand seeks other hands to help,

A community of hands to help —

Thus the dream becomes not one man's dream alone,

But a community dream.

Not my dream alone, but our dream.

Not my world alone,

But your world and my world,

Belonging to all the hands who build.



—Excerpted from “Freedom’s Plow,”
by Langston Hughes

Introduction

A new conversation about child abuse and neglect is taking place in Los Angeles County. If you visit any of the 18 regional offices of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) or stop by community-based organizations in low-income neighborhoods, you are likely to hear stories like these:

- A neighborhood action council in a housing project opens up a community conversation about child abuse and neglect and how to prevent it.
- DCFS refers an unemployed, stressed mother of six to a community-based organization to receive intensive family support services. Now all her children are in day care or after-school programs, and she has a job. Her family is stronger, and they are together.
- A group of parents from a housing project writes and stars in a play about issues they deal with regularly: child abuse, substance abuse, domestic violence and teen pregnancy.
- DCFS removes six children from a family because of a dirty and unsafe home. A parent advocate and cultural broker join forces to help the parents, and the family is reunited within six months.
- Members of a church congregation volunteer to monitor visits between parents and their children in the system, freeing up social workers to spend more time with other families and making it easier for visits to take place after work and on weekends.

These stories – and there are many more where they came from – are about helping families thrive, about helping parents find concrete support, and hope, in difficult times. These stories are part of an expanding network of local partnerships – public, private, nonprofit and faith-based. The stories describe a child welfare system in transition, where managers focus on community collaboration and social workers build expertise in such survival issues as housing, jobs and food banks. These stories illustrate community-based organizations that are discovering new ways to work with DCFS and with each other. At the heart of these stories – and, in fact, the reason why these stories matter – are families that are learning to reach out for help and are finding it, sometimes as close as next door.

The Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project

The important new buzz word here is prevention, specifically prevention of child abuse and neglect, and it is the center of a bold experiment between DCFS and community partners called the Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project (PIDP).

In a county the size of Los Angeles, the Prevention Initiative does not represent much money – only \$5 million for one year, funded by DCFS and applied across all eight of the county's Service Planning Areas (SPAs). That \$5 million has gone a long way, however, in demonstrating a model for a new kind of partnership between DCFS and community agencies, a partnership that extends far beyond the traditional parameters of the normal contractual relationships for services delivered.

DCFS and its partners are under no illusions about the complexity of the problems faced by families in Los Angeles today. But the vision holds. The bottom line is a comprehensive, expanded focus on prevention in order to reach families before small problems turn into big crises.

In April, at a gathering of PIDP partners, DCFS Director Trish Ploehn underlined the significance of this innovative initiative: “PIDP represents a really important change in the way social work is done in Los Angeles. We are using collaboration and genuinely working together to ensure that we look not only at child abuse after it occurs, but at the root causes of child abuse and neglect so that we can get ahead of the game and help families and children prevent harm from ever occurring.”

DCFS is funding the initiative, but community agencies are equal partners when it comes to setting the agenda. DCFS chose one or more lead agencies in each SPA to strengthen existing community networks and partner with DCFS regional offices. The lead agencies chose a number of subcontracted agencies to extend the roots deeper into the community and to reach more families.

What is unique, perhaps even radical about this initiative is that it aims to erase the artificial boundaries that sometimes mean families are offered services based on their level of involvement with the child welfare system. PIDP recognizes that families may need the same services, whether or not their children have been removed, or if the family recently has been reunified, or if parents were referred to the system but have no open case, or even if the family has never been involved with DCFS at all. PIDP also means these families should be able to find help from the same networks in their own communities.

Flexibility is the name of the game. The networks in each SPA developed a set of activities based on their own values and definition of their community’s needs. Licha Drake of The Children’s Bureau of Southern California, one of three lead agencies in SPA 4, said: “The beauty and complexity of this initiative is that it is different from SPA to SPA.”

What binds it together is a set of common values: a focus on family strengths; active, day-to-day collaboration between DCFS and community staff; a commitment to helping families thrive in the face of an economic crisis; and an intention to reach families in their own communities.

The Audience and Content of This Report

This report is for leaders in Los Angeles County – in both DCFS and the community – who have worked to bring about positive change at the grassroots level. It also is for policymakers, in Los Angeles and beyond, who make decisions about funding and use of resources. Ultimately, this report is written on behalf of the parents and children who struggle with the day-to-day problems of building stable and nurturing families – and who do not think in terms of “silos” or “service delivery” or “prevention initiatives.”

This report shows what prevention means to families, community-based organizations, DCFS and the growing community networks across the county. The report chronicles the first year of the PIDP initiative. It is not, however, a comprehensive narrative of all the activities that took place. So much has happened – and still is happening – that it cannot be contained in one document.

The stories in this report are organized around three inter-related strategies of the Prevention Initiative: decreasing family isolation, increasing family economic stability and access to integrated services in the community. Other sections include an overview of a community network, the changing culture of DCFS, increased faith-based support for families and the impact of this innovative initiative.

A formal evaluation of PIDP, conducted by a team of academics led by Casey Family Programs, has recently been completed. A report on the findings will be released later this summer.

Evolution of PIDP and National Context

Removing a child from his or her home is one of the most difficult decisions a social worker has to make. Child welfare workers and managers across the country know that even when placement is necessary, it can be a traumatic and confusing experience for both children and their parents. Far too often, one placement leads to another and then to another. Parents do not always get the help and support they need to get their children back. Research shows that children who grow up in foster care often fare poorly as adults. Sadly, children who have experienced foster care are just as likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as U.S. war veterans.

The Prevention Initiative is an example of an innovative practice in child welfare that is helping to reduce the need for foster care by strengthening families and keeping children safe at home, where they have the best chance to grow into happy, healthy and confident adults.

The concept of community building as a child welfare prevention strategy emerged in the mid-1990s when Congress passed federal legislation that funded family support and preservation services. In 2003, DCFS set agency-wide goals to reduce reliance on out-of-home care, recognizing that partnerships in the community were important to success. In 2004, DCFS introduced a pilot of Point of Engagement, an approach that engages families as partners and responds to referrals with specific and targeted community-based services as soon as possible to provide immediate support for parents and help them safely care for their children.

The enthusiasm for this demonstration project and the initial evaluation findings were so promising that DCFS and the CEO's office of Los Angeles County decided to invest another \$5 million for a second year of PIDP.

Community organizations always have emphasized prevention for families in troubled neighborhoods. During the past decade, at the request of the Board of Supervisors, community leaders brought their views and experience to a series of prevention-focused meetings with DCFS, county commissions and other government agencies, including the county's Chief Executive Office. The Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families and The Children's Council (formerly The Children's Planning Council) took leadership roles in designing a prevention strategy to bring DCFS and community-based organizations together as partners.

All of this rich discussion and planning led to the Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project that we know today. The County Board of Supervisors approved it in February 2008; it initially was a 12-month effort, but was extended through June 2009. The enthusiasm for this demonstration project and the initial evaluation findings were so promising that DCFS and the CEO's office of Los Angeles County decided to invest another \$5 million for a second year of PIDP. DCFS is using savings generated by the county's participation in a federal Title IV-E waiver, which authorizes the agency to spend federal and state foster care funds flexibly and reinvest savings to meet a range of child welfare goals.

As part of its work across the country with states, counties and American Indian tribes, Casey Family Programs has supported PIDP with technical assistance and evaluation expertise. PIDP fits well with the foundation's 2020 Strategy that calls for safely reducing the number of children in foster care by 50 percent by the year 2020. The foundation is joining hands with child welfare agencies, community organizations, faith-based institutions and residents to address the root causes of child abuse and child neglect. By surrounding vulnerable families with community-based support services, programs like PIDP help ensure that parents get adequate and appropriate support while children who do not need to be in foster care can remain at home safely.

PIDP at a Glance

The Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project brings DCFS and community organizations together as partners. The goal is to keep children safe, while preventing families from entering, re-entering or experiencing extended stays in the child welfare system. To accomplish this goal, PIDP focuses on building strong networks to support families in their own communities.

Details of PIDP include:

- The initiative is based on the hypothesis that child abuse and neglect can be reduced if:
 - Families are less isolated and able to access the support they need.
 - Families are economically stable and can support themselves financially.
 - Activities and resources are integrated in communities and accessible to families.
- Each SPA developed strategies to address all three of these points, but there was a good deal of variation in emphasis. Some focused much more on decreasing family isolation, others on economic stability or expanding services and resources in the community.
- Each SPA targeted high-risk neighborhoods or ZIP codes based in part on the rate of calls to the DCFS 24-hour Child Protection Hotline. Each SPA has one or more lead agencies and a local network of subcontracted agencies. Nearly 100 agencies are participating across the county.
- Each SPA network includes elements that focus on: families not known to DCFS (primary prevention); families known, but with no open case (secondary prevention); and families already part of the system (tertiary prevention).
- Regular community events, resource fairs, picnics and job fairs helped the initiative reach thousands of families with information and links to services.
- At the request of DCFS, Casey Family Programs is helping support PIDP in three areas: building strong partnerships, communications and evaluation. Under the Casey Family Programs umbrella:
 - The Center for the Study of Social Policy provides technical assistance to help build stronger public-private partnerships. Consultants facilitated early meetings and agenda-setting in each of the SPAs and helped lead agencies and DCFS bridge divisions and stay on track.
 - Nakatomi and Associates helped participants frame a common set of messages about this new focus on prevention. The firm also developed materials, including a communication tool kit that can be personalized for each SPA.
 - The PIDP evaluation is led by Casey Family Programs and is both qualitative and quantitative. Evaluators are from Casey Family Programs, University of Southern California, Claremont Graduate University, California State University-Long Beach, UCLA and First 5 LA.

Decreasing Family Isolation

Some families in communities with high poverty rates are isolated, marginalized and have few social connections. Each of the SPAs developed activities to reach these families. Four SPAs – 2, 4, 7 and 8 – focused attention on a primary prevention strategy that uses a resident-driven, community organizing model. Unlike most community organizing, which focuses on issues first, this model starts with relationships and builds out from there.

Whether the work is called relationship-based community organizing or social network building, the aim is to bring people together in groups to discuss their hopes and concerns for themselves and their communities, and to figure out ways to address them. Professionals facilitate and guide meetings, but take a back seat when it comes to decision-making and action steps.

Some groups are neighborhood-based; others are identity-based, such as grandparents or American Indians. Each group spends several months building connections, and choosing a name and a set of core values. Members then identify specific projects to work on. Residents are encouraged to speak up and ask for help. Outside partners are brought in as needed to enhance practical expertise, such as research, organizational and financial literacy. Change happens person by person, family by family, group by group. Along the way, as members gain confidence and the groups take on more projects, their communities begin to change.

In SPA 2, the groups are called Community Action Groups, or CAGs. Friends of the Family, the lead agency in SPA 2, is facilitating more than two dozen CAGs. In SPAs 7 and 8, they are called Neighborhood Action Councils, or NACs. South Bay Center for Counseling (SBCC), the lead agency in SPA 8, facilitates 45 NACs, 18 of which were newly developed as part of the Prevention Initiative.

Agency staff do not ask whether anyone is, or ever has been, involved with DCFS. The groups include families at all levels of involvement with the system. SBCC Executive Director Colleen Mooney said families show up every week because they want to. And they bring a range of experience and issues that frame their conversations and lead to action.

“The idea of health, safety and financial well-being – and the ability of children to be safe – all these tend to be core values of everyone we’ve encountered.”

—Kelly Hopkins,
director of community organizing at SBCC

Connecting Relationship-based Organizing to Child Abuse Prevention

Each group chooses a focus. Rowana Johnson, who became legal guardian of her brother and sister after their mother died, is part of a NAC that is planning a three-day resource fair on child abuse, sexual abuse and rape. Johnson found that a lot of her group had dealt with these issues.

“The little kids don’t know that fondling isn’t OK,” she said. “We’re finding out that there’s so much hidden stuff because you don’t talk about it. I wish I had been able to deal with it as a child, so we’re trying to give these little kids a chance – and not just the little kids. The older people, too.”

Johnson’s NAC did traditional research about child abuse and child abuse prevention. But the shared experiences made the difference and kept the information accessible, much more so than bringing in outside experts.

For other NACs, the connection to child abuse prevention comes when the groups choose their core values. Kelly Hopkins, director of community organizing at SBCC, said: “The idea of health, safety and financial well-being – and the ability of children to be safe – all these tend to be core values of everyone we’ve encountered.”

Case Story: Parents in Motion, Creating New Beginnings

Kellye Aguirre has had her children removed by DCFS on two occasions. When she first heard about the NACs, she had five kids in the system and was working toward getting them back. She was introduced to the NAC concept by Kelly Hopkins at SBCC and was impressed by their approach.

“Kelly talked to us about positive things, things that every parent wants for their children,” Aguirre said. “And we were like, ‘Oh, my God, it’s like a little ray of light coming through,’ because our life was dark at the time. We were sad because we had lost our kids, and we knew it was our fault.”

Aguirre’s NAC is appropriately called Parents in Motion, Creating New Beginnings. Aguirre’s NAC began with what they already knew – what it’s like to be in the system. The group brought in one of SBCC’s partner agencies to discuss how to work with DCFS, and an SBCC staff member came to talk about financial literacy in response to the group’s concerns about poverty.

By working with her peers in the NAC, Aguirre learned how to move beyond a negative mindset – “to learn from your own situation and go forward,” she said. She and her husband have been reunited with their children, who now number six. She lives below the poverty line and explained that she used to believe “if you can swim, swim. If you can’t, you’re going to drown. And that’s how it was.” She said her NAC taught her how to swim – how not to feel sorry for herself and instead to change the situation.

Two other families in her NAC have reunited with their children who were in DCFS custody, a testament to the power of NAC members’ support for one another, Hopkins said. “Kellye’s guidance and counsel based on her own experiences had a lot to do with why she and her husband were able to get their kids back,” she said. “And for Kellye to actually facilitate growth in other people has had a huge positive impact on her.”

Kellye Aguirre’s whole approach to life is different now: “Being in my NAC is teaching me a broader thought process so when I wake up in the morning, I don’t scream at my children anymore. My children are happier at school. They play better with the neighbors. My children are no longer whining.”

She smiles as she talks about her six children: “They’re so beautiful. They eat so much!”

Changing Communities One Neighborhood at a Time

NAC participants from SPA 8 spoke about transforming their own personal lives. But the approach reaches far beyond individual families. Rowana Johnson’s group is based in Carmelitos, a large public housing project in Long Beach. To her, the NAC was the link between how she felt about herself and how she felt about her community. In the NAC, she said, “no one will judge you, but you’re getting advice on how to deal with problems. You bring that back to your neighbors or what we call your parking lot. It might not necessarily change right there, but it’s a trickle effect, like when you throw a rock into a pond. You’ll see a difference after a while.”

In the beginning, Johnson’s NAC had only four Latinas. Now the diversity is greater. In her part of Carmelitos, a tense, sometimes violent, relationship between Latinos and blacks is improving. “You’ve got to learn that this is your community,” Johnson said. “This is where you live and you want it to be safe. You want it to be happy. You want it to be controlled. So you’ve got to learn to be the bigger person and keep the peace.”

Johnson’s NAC looked at what it means to keep the peace and began spreading the word. “You might not see this

big old shift in my community, but you see it in my life and you see it in my next-door neighbor, and we're more friendly," she said. "We're actually dealing with our issues now."

Through her NAC, Johnson's view of herself has changed. Her view of her community has changed. Along the way, her community is changing, too.

Case Story: Learning To Speak Up

Christina Berry's NAC is a group of adults and teens focused on intergenerational communication. She said: "Before, I was very much in the space of 'I'm the parent. What I say goes.' But when teens are given the opportunity to speak, they really make a contribution to our community."

Berry's daughter is now president of Students Against Destructive Decisions in her school. "I'm raising a happier person and a more empowered person," Berry said. Her NAC is hosting community forums for teens and adults to talk about sex, drugs and alcohol. They've reached far beyond NAC members to other residents and even teachers in the local high school.

Berry's own communication skills have changed, as well. A personal victory came after she heard her next-door neighbor screaming at his wife. "It was 1 a.m.," she said. "They have an adult daughter and a (3-year-old) grandchild in the house. Then I hear this crash. And I'm thinking to myself, 'What do I do? Do I stay out of it?'"

Berry did not stay out of it. She called 911 and went next-door. "I can see him," she recalled. "He's still going off, and I hear the grandbaby crying, and I tell his wife, 'You know, this is not OK. You don't deserve this.'" He had injured his adult daughter. The police came and arrested him.

After he had been released, the neighbor came up to Berry when she was in her car in the driveway. "I'm like, 'Uh oh, here we go,'" she said. "And he says, 'I just want to tell you that all this stuff is going on and that's why I'm screaming and yelling.' I let him talk, and he apologized to me and said, 'I hope you never get in a situation where you're with a man who treats you that way.' And I told him, 'Well, I've done that, played that game, and I'm not doing that anymore. But all I want to tell you, sir, is that I hope you get yourself in a situation where you can express your anger in a more constructive way. What you did is not OK.'"

Berry added: "Before, I probably would not have gone next-door. And now I feel that this is my community, and I really need to do something about it. So I did."

Increasing Family Economic Stability

The economic recession was just taking root in Los Angeles when the Prevention Initiative began in February 2008. But poverty and high unemployment are nothing new to the communities where this initiative is working.

PIDP brought DCFS and community agencies together with a goal of looking at each family as a whole.

Parents' financial ability to take care of their children is critical to family stability, but a focus on economic success is not a traditional function of child welfare. PIDP brought DCFS and community agencies together with a goal of looking at each family as a whole. As a result, a family's economic security became a core element of the initiative. Each SPA integrated economic strategies into its PIDP package. The strategies are varied and innovative. They include: financial literacy courses; hands-on help with resume writing and interviewing skills; in-depth job training; and access to government benefits and tax credits. Deborah Davies of Friends

of the Family in SPA 2 believes that these activities have "prevented families from coming to DCFS attention at all and have kept more children at home."

Jobs, Jobs, Jobs

Job preparation is a clear and obvious need. SHIELDS for Families, the lead agency in SPA 6, has a strong focus on vocational and educational services. Audrey Tousant, the PIDP program manager at SHIELDS, said that in the current economic climate, the agency is serving a lot of unemployed families. She quickly added that in this particular recession, unemployment is connected to homelessness more than ever. Unemployment is bad enough, but when coupled with homelessness, it can shake the bedrock of stability for families.

SHIELDS offers certification programs in high-growth industries, such as fiber optics, medical billing, EMT and office communications. The courses are particularly useful for those who have been laid off from downsized fields, such as construction. In SPA 6, SHIELDS students can be seen climbing ladders and hanging onto telephone poles, working on the wires. In the office, they are hard at work in the computer lab.

The courses are 15 to 20 weeks long. The training is hands-on. The classes are free.

The latest fiber optics students did their field work at one of SHIELDS' residential centers, setting up the telephone wires for the site. After students complete the training and field work, SHIELDS helps them find jobs at companies such as Time Warner Cable, T-Mobile, Verizon and AT&T.

The in-depth learning experience brings an added bonus. Tousant said: "The camaraderie among the students in our fiber optics class led to the men starting a support group, which is still going on today with the next series of classes."

Some of the NACs and community action groups include a focus on employment, offering support for job preparation and placement. In SPA 8, Rowana Johnson has made it her mission to reach out to young African American males on the employment front.

"I'm going after them because I see them just falling by the wayside, Latino men, too," she said. "It feels good when you see them actually putting their best foot forward, cutting their hair, not even sagging, dressing right and actually going down there and really trying."

Unemployment is huge in Johnson's community, and she said she worries about the young men who see no alternatives: "It's happening so fast. Like, what do you do? You see them one second and the next minute they're gone because they decide to rob a store ... They need money so bad."

Case Story: From Prison to a Business of His Own

Mark Anthony Douglas, a father of three and an ex-offender, was in a halfway house when he heard of SHIELDS for Families. He was struggling with finding stable employment because of his prison record and lack of work experience. He got out of the halfway house and started the fiber optics cable certification course at SHIELDS the very next day. He got a job immediately and has worked as a technical consultant and an independent contractor with several reputable firms. With this experience under his belt, he decided to start his own company. Now he can hire others. He said of SHIELDS: “Through this organization, the spirit of opportunity that was once lost can be found and a new beginning can be realized for so many individuals who just need to be given that one chance.”

The Need for Legal Support

PIDP was designed to respond to community needs, but planners had not realized that legal assistance would be so much in demand. In SPA 6, legal aid was the third most frequent request for help, after housing and food, and before counseling, parenting and employment. SPAs 4 and 6 have added legal aid to their package of activities.

Lawyers advise residents on a range of legal needs, including housing, employment and immigration. Some clients need legal help to get a juvenile record expunged in order to get a job, for example, or need a “certificate of rehabilitation” following substance abuse treatment. The SPA 6 partnership is organizing a community legal clinic, bringing in attorneys to talk about different areas of the law and help answer residents’ questions.

Getting Money Back from the Government

PIDP’s lead agencies and their partners help families determine eligibility for a range of government programs. They assist families in enrolling for food stamps and public assistance and finding Section 8 funds to help pay for rent. In 2009, there was also an additional push to get money back through tax refunds, including the Child Tax Credit (CTC) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). This push augmented work being done by the Children’s Council and other county efforts as well, a good example of how PIDP is leveraging other resources.

Many families with limited incomes are eligible for these credits. But first, they have to know about them and file their tax returns. National estimates indicate that up to one-quarter of those eligible do not claim their benefits.

Families struggling with poverty often cannot pay commercial tax preparers to do their returns. In Los Angeles County, the goal was to offer free tax return preparation. Some SPAs worked through the Greater Los Angeles Economic Alliance, a collaborative of public, private and government organizations working to provide economic development opportunities to low-income individuals and families. Other SPAs worked with Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites, using federally trained volunteers. Some SPAs did both. Altogether, the effort was countywide, and according to Colleen Mooney of South Bay Center for Counseling, families received an estimated \$5 million in tax credits, money that went directly into the pockets of residents, money that helped infuse the economy of the communities where they live.

Partnering with Chinatown Service Center and the Pacific Asian Consortium in Employment, SPA 4 ran a VITA site at each of its three lead agencies: Children’s Bureau (at Magnolia Place Family Center), Children’s Institute, Inc., and El Centro del Pueblo. Families learned about the tax preparation service from traditional outreach efforts, telephone information and television announcements. Volunteers offered free tax return preparation and at the same time, information on resources such as financial skill programs or family support services.

In SPA 4, clients included those who had lost their jobs or were losing their homes. Most had paid professionals in the past to do their taxes and were happy to save the fees. Many were eligible for EITC and child tax credits.

Throughout SPA 4, VITA volunteers prepared 257 free tax returns, of which 83 were eligible for EITC refunds and 44 for child tax credits. Families took in \$323,254 in refunds in SPA 4 through the VITA sites. An additional five tax sites in SPA 4 brought in refunds of \$813,318. This means more than \$1.1 million was returned to residents in SPA 4 alone. A post-tax informal survey in SPA 4 indicated that families used their refunds to pay debts, as well as for clothing, housing expenditures and education.

An Expanding Economic Alliance

At a PIDP meeting in April, community and DCFS leaders grappled with the impact of the current economic crisis. When Steve Baker, executive director of Grace Resource Center in SPA 1, said “A good recession is a terrible thing to waste,” he meant it. The recession offers an opportunity to do business differently and leverage other efforts underway, including a countywide economic alliance focused on job development. The Prevention Initiative fits right into this work.

The Greater Los Angeles Economic Alliance aims to expand a two-year-old network of Workforce and Economic Development Centers across the county, with active involvement of some of the lead PIDP agencies. The alliance hopes to support job development in high unemployment areas of the county. SBCC’s Colleen Mooney described her vision that already is underway in SPA 8: “We have a career pathway program that has been very successful in moving low-income people into high paying union-represented jobs,” such as local refineries. SBCC also is placing gang-involved youth into an urban teacher fellowship, which can lead to a teaching credential. The career pathway model helps clients develop academic, technical and job preparation skills and offers ongoing education and training once they are employed. Workers and their families also are eligible for social services such as counseling, free child care, transportation vouchers and other support.

Access To Integrated Services In The Community

Even in difficult economic times, Los Angeles has extensive community resources. After all, these are the shoulders on which the Prevention Initiative is built. The challenge comes in ensuring that families can find and access that support in every community. Assisting families as they identify needs, find appropriate help and learn how to ask for it are important issues on the PIDP to-do list.

Ask, Seek, Knock

SPA 6 is one of the smaller SPAs geographically, but it has the highest poverty rate and one of the highest placement rates of any SPA. Through the Prevention Initiative, the PIDP network developed a program called Ask, Seek, Knock (ASK). Housed at three of the subcontracted agencies, three centers cover all of SPA 6.

The SPA 6 network developed a new job position called a “navigator.” Navigators help families negotiate various systems to find services and support in their neighborhoods. They are community leaders who work with DCFS-referred families and walk-ins. As of late April, SHIELDS for Families, the lead agency in the SPA, had an online database of 919 different community resources to use as referrals. Staff plan to put the database on a kiosk, a public computer where residents can do searches themselves to find help in their own neighborhood. Other resource databases exist as well, including an online site, HealthyCity.org. As these become publicly available on computers in resource centers, even families who have no computer of their own will be able to enter their ZIP code and get an immediate list of references.

Navigators are recruited from the community. Navigator Sharon Eason had retired from her job at Avalon Carter Community Center, one of the subcontracted agencies in SPA 6. But her retirement lasted only 11 months. “I’m learning there’s no such thing as retirement,” she said. “My former office was right where I am sitting now. I even still have all my files and resources.”

As a navigator, Eason works hand-in-hand with Audrey Tousant from SHIELDS to find resources and to go beyond the obvious, especially on thorny issues such as housing. Getting on a waiting list is not a good enough answer for families without a home. “People need help now,” Eason said. “You try to help people and put out fires. You try to make time for everybody who comes in.”

Word of mouth is important in SPA 6, but outreach goes way beyond that. The community is blanketed with flyers and information. Eason has talked up ASK and distributed flyers at job fairs, nonprofit agencies, schools, supermarkets, churches, health fairs, parks, the Department of Motor Vehicles, Probation, DCFS, colleges, the Employment Development Department, homeless outreach programs and more. Eason said one of her clients even saw the flyer at a liquor store: “I haven’t done outreach at a liquor store, but whatever works.” Outreach has become such a natural function of anyone involved in PIDP that one of the evaluators even referred a homeless man he met on a bus to an ASK center.

Food and housing are two of the most basic ingredients of family health and stability. “The bottom is falling out for people who live paycheck-to-paycheck and who then get laid off,” Tousant said. “They can’t pay the rent or the mortgage.” Navigators have become experts in housing and homelessness. West Angeles CDC, one of the subcontracted agencies in SPA 6, is providing foreclosure prevention services.

“Families frequently don’t know where to go,” said Audrey Tousant of SHIELDS. “What is most fulfilling in this work is to be able to say, ‘OK, there’s a resource here,’ and immediately connect the family and strengthen the family unit.”

Sharron Eason tells the story of a woman and her husband who both worked at Los Angeles International Airport and were living in housing provided by their employer. When they were laid off, they also lost their company-sponsored home. They had two children of their own and one child in foster care. The couple found out about Avalon Carver Community Center from a flyer. They met with Eason, who handed them a list of housing resources and sat them down with instructions to call each one. She encouraged them not to accept “we have nothing for you” as an answer. “Ask if they know anything else,” she advised. The family found a place and avoided becoming homeless.. Had they not found a home, they would surely have lost their foster child and their family would have faced a crisis. Coming to Avalon Carver was a turning point for this family.

When a family with children in DCFS custody is ready to be reunited, homelessness can be a heartbreaking barrier because parents need housing to get their children back. ASK Centers have helped parents work through the Catch 22s of a system in which you can't get your children back until you have housing, but you can't get government support to help pay for housing until you have your children.

Case Story: Redefining Basic Needs

Sometimes the need for support goes beyond the basics. One of the navigators met with a grandmother who had just gotten custody of her teenage granddaughter. The grandmother came in for a referral to a food bank. The navigator, as is the practice, engaged her to see what else this family might need. It turns out the granddaughter was graduating from high school, but had no cap and gown. The navigator knew that a nearby Lutheran church had a sewing class, so she called the pastor, who invited the granddaughter to stop by the next day to be measured for a cap and gown that church members would make for her.

What is special about this story is not the cap and gown, but the fact that the navigator and the grandmother had the conversation and that the navigator knew where to go so the young woman could stand tall on her graduation day. The navigator also connected this family to DPSS (Department of Public Social Services) to get financial assistance. A phone call resulted in an immediate appointment. “Families frequently don't know where to go,” said Tousant of SHIELDS. “What is most fulfilling in this work is to be able to say, ‘OK, there's a resource here,’ and immediately connect the family and strengthen the family unit.” Scouring the community for informal and formal support pays off when it comes to family well-being.

Parent Advocates and Cultural Brokers

Common sense plays an important role when it comes to helping families prevent child abuse and neglect. If parents are at risk of losing their children to foster care because of a chaotic and unhealthy home, for example, they may not need extensive involvement of DCFS staff. But they do need practical help. In SPA 3, PIDP is using parent advocates and cultural brokers to offer basic support aimed at keeping children out of the system or, when that is not possible, helping families reunite quickly.

Parent advocates and cultural brokers work for Prototypes, the lead agency in SPA 3. They are community leaders who were doing elements of their job long before the Prevention Initiative came along and offered them a desk and a stipend. They often know who in the neighborhood needs help and can reach out to them before DCFS even thinks of getting involved.

SPA 3 is particularly interested in reducing the disproportionate number of African American children in the child welfare system, a national problem that is also of great concern in Los Angeles County. Latino children are

by far the largest child population group in the county, and they also make up the majority of those in the child welfare system. But their placement rate aligns with their proportion of the population, which is not at all the story for African American children.

In Pomona, for example, African American children make up less than 10 percent of the child population, yet represent 23 percent of those in foster care. Over the course of several years, the Pomona regional office developed numerous strategies to study and address the problem, most recently using PIDP funds to support parent advocates and cultural brokers.

For Pasadena DCFS supervisor Kimala Lewis, a field trip to Fresno sponsored by Casey Family Programs “really lit my fire,” she said, when she saw how cultural brokers there were working to reduce disproportionality. “It helped us to see our families in a different way and even to respect them more,” she said. DCFS in SPA 3 is adding internal awareness education around the issue of disproportionality. Both parent advocates and cultural brokers have a key role to play.

Parent advocates are parents who themselves once had an open case with DCFS and therefore have first-hand experience negotiating the child welfare system. They identify with parents and, more important, parents identify with them. Parent advocates are an on-site, in-person support system for parents. There are three parent advocates working full time in SPA 3.

Cultural brokers ideally share the same culture as the families with whom they work, helping parents understand the expectations of DCFS and helping DCFS better understand the strengths and background of the family. Cultural brokers take on a lot of voluntary family maintenance cases, which means DCFS is formally involved but the children are not removed, and the family receives services they need to remain together safely. Cultural brokers share some of the basic family-support functions with parent advocates and regularly attend Team Decision-Making meetings (TDMs), making sure families understand the decisions made. There are three cultural brokers in SPA 3, each working three days a week.

Both parent advocates and cultural brokers learn when and how to raise concerns with DCFS if there is a safety problem in the family that must be addressed. “They have to do that dance between the department and the family,” Lewis explained, which means supporting the parents but also letting them know why the department might have to intervene if a child is at risk.

A parent advocate at work. June Turner, a former telemarketer, is a parent advocate for Prototypes based in Pasadena. Her own family was involved in a voluntary family maintenance case 20 years ago, but she is quick to point out that DCFS is different now.

Turner listed just a few of her activities as a parent advocate:

- She drove a mom to a visit with her children who had been taken into custody. On the way, she ironed out a bureaucratic snafu that threatened to cancel the visit, all the while encouraging the distraught mother to be calm.
- She took evicted clients to find housing and helped them get Section 8 government support to pay for it.
- She attended a court hearing and stuck up for a parent in front of a judge.

“I believe I was born to advocate. I’m not afraid to talk to people. When I had my case with DCFS, there was no one like this to help me.”

—June Turner, parent advocate

- She negotiated with the utilities company on behalf of a client and found a way to keep the lights on.
- She mediated between the Health Department and the Code Enforcement Division of the Housing Department to rid a home of fleas.
- She taught a mom how to make a budget and a shopping list.
- On a regular basis, she attends TDMs, helping develop safety plans with the family and DCFS.

“We make things happen,” Turner said. “We get things moving. Clients let their hair down around us, and we see what the social workers don’t see.” She pointed out with pride that two of her families are reuniting this summer.

Turner joined other SPA 3 representatives in a Breakthrough Series Collaborative, a sequence of learning sessions that tackle big problems like disproportionality and come up with small experiments to test ideas for change. As part of that process, Turner got to brainstorm with judges, social workers and agency leaders – and her ideas were heard. “I never thought my life experience would land me in a job doing this,” she said. “I believe I was born to advocate. I’m not afraid to talk to people. When I had my case with DCFS, there was no one like this to help me.”

A cultural broker at work. As a cultural broker, Linda Hawes works three days a week with Prototypes in Pomona. She has been a foster parent and an adoptive parent, and in her other job, she trains prospective foster and adoptive parents. When the Prevention Initiative came along, getting involved was a natural for her, especially given her concern about the overrepresentation of African American children in the system.

Many of Hawes’ cases are voluntary family maintenance. She is an intermediary between the family and DCFS, helping each to understand the other. She makes referrals for services such as counseling and health care. She explains DCFS rules and regulations to parents, especially when it comes to making sure they understand what is required of them after a Team Decision-Making meeting. “I’ll stay in the lobby after a TDM to go over it again and make sure parents know what they have to do first,” she said. “Sometimes they’re overwhelmed with a whole list of items. Especially if the children aren’t detained, they need to get on board with their next steps. So I help them work on what they’re going to do tomorrow.”

Hawes reiterated the importance of working with families before children are removed. “Just the word ‘prevention’ means something now,” she said. Hawes also talked about changes at DCFS: “Workers who used to think I was invading their privacy in a TDM actually ask for me now. And I have even been pulled out of one TDM to participate in another where they thought I could be more effective. I just think that’s fantastic.”

Case Story: A Family in Crisis Gets Critical Support

A family in Pomona has six children under age 5, one with a medical condition. When that child went into crisis one day and stopped breathing, the father did CPR and saved the child's life. An ambulance and the police arrived to take the child to the hospital. Although it is hard to imagine, things began to get worse at this point. The father was emotional and got into a dispute with the police. He was arrested. After going into the house, the police made a referral to remove the other five children because of what the officers said was the filthiest house they'd ever seen in Pomona.

The siblings were placed in foster care and separated, some away from Pomona, which made family visits difficult. The father got out of jail, but lost his job. The mother was overwhelmed. Cultural broker Linda Hawes recalled: "When I met this family in the lobby at DCFS, the mom was still in her pajamas. I told her I was there to support her, to make sure her voice was heard and that she was treated with respect. The word 'support' meant so much to her that she gave me a big bear hug and almost lifted me off the ground."

After the children were removed, a parent advocate came to the home and went to work with the mother on housekeeping skills. The advocate helped her clear the backyard and taught her how to clean the house and keep food from spoiling in the refrigerator. She also taught her how to shop at the food bank, make her dollars stretch, 'baby proof' a room and use time management skills to get through the day with six young children. The father found a new job, and the advocate and cultural broker worked with him, too, showing how he could help with the kids and housework. The mother joined a parenting group and got support from other parents who had been involved with DCFS. When the department's social worker was ready to do a walk-through of the home in preparation for the return of the children, the mother wanted both Hawes and the parent advocate to be there with her. They were.

This story has a happy ending. All the children returned home within six months. Hawes stops by from time to time and reports that "the house is still clean and the children are looking well."

She said: "I met this mom at a most devastating time in her life, and it was beautiful to watch her grow, to watch her stand taller each week as we worked with her." Having an advocate and a broker for this family meant the difference between long stays in foster care for six children vs. short stays. It also meant the bonds in this family were not broken, as the parents got the support they needed to move forward with confidence.

A Community Network In Action

All of the SPA networks are working to leverage every possible resource to support isolated families, build strategies for economic stability and find help for families both in and out of the system. In SPA 2, the lead agency Friends of the Family pulled together an extended network of 14 subcontracted partners and at least 30 additional partners. It built on an existing network in one of the three targeted ZIP codes, the Pacoima Community Initiative (PCI), and advanced the issue of child abuse prevention on the long list of needs in the community.

In order to engage new families, PCI reached out to residents of San Fernando Gardens, a low-income housing project where some parents say danger is such that they are reluctant to let their children play outside. Parents there started their own group and, with the help of a PIDP subcontractor, wrote and performed a play, "Life, Love, Lies," or "Vida, Amor, Mentiras" in Spanish. The themes were child abuse, substance abuse, domestic violence and teen pregnancy, issues the families deal with on a regular basis.

As is true throughout the county, families in SPA 2 are struggling to maintain financial stability. The SPA 2 network includes partners that help families with economic support, such as food, rent, furniture, clothing and utilities. The PIDP network also includes job clubs that focus on job readiness and development. Some families in SPA 2 are undocumented, so partners look for day labor jobs and educate those families about their rights to a bank account, for example. A financial literacy program for youth offers stipends for attendance and encouragement to open a savings account.

Danny Molina, PIDP project director at Friends of the Family, said all of the work connects to family stability and thus to prevention of child abuse: “We’ve noticed that if we can help families pay the rent or put food in the refrigerator, there are decreased levels of stress in the home, decreased instances of domestic violence. And we believe if a family is not struggling with financial hardship, there is more contentment at home, parents feel more competent and they treat their children better.”

Friends of the Family also offers comprehensive case management to about 70 families referred by DCFS. This, too, is part of the agency’s PIDP work, and community partners join in to support parents and youth. The same goes for the community action groups they facilitate throughout the SPA. If there is a need for child care, for example, during the weekly group meetings, there are partners to provide in-kind services. Molina said: “Wherever the family enters the network, they will have access to a wide range of resources. That’s what has created so much excitement around this initiative.” In the end, it is not that Friends of the Family is inventing new approaches to working with families in the community. It’s that it is leveraging funds and rolling out an expanded network that brings a lot of different approaches together. This community network is shining a new light on prevention.

Changing The Culture Of DCFS

This focus on prevention of abuse and neglect is a natural for community-based organizations that were able to ramp up and expand the kind of work they always have done. But for many child welfare agencies, prevention is considered a stretch, and inclusion of family economic stability as part of their mandate is a leap. That is no

longer true at DCFS, where PIDP is part of a larger cultural change taking place at the agency. DCFS is looking to integrate whatever it takes to help children stay safe and families remain stable.

In the past, DCFS collaboration with the community meant going to meetings.

There are still a lot of meetings, but collaboration now includes more action and an enhanced sense of shared accountability between the department and the community.

Along with PIDP, another program focused on economic assistance, Linkages, is currently being phased in across the county. Linkages is a joint effort of DCFS and the Department of Public Social Services, designed to help families involved with either department get the benefits to which they are entitled from both departments. This means eligible families are able to get public assistance, employment assistance and child welfare assistance at the same time.

PIDP has sharpened an already evolving effort in Los Angeles County, a focus on community networks that bring DCFS offices together as partners with local, neighborhood organizations. In the past, DCFS collaboration with the community meant going to meetings. There are still a lot of meetings, but collaboration now includes more action and an enhanced sense of shared accountability between the department and the community. Some changes at DCFS stem directly from PIDP and the new partnerships that were carved out in the SPAs. Other changes are part of a larger, intentional shift that encourages regional offices to work more closely with the

community to keep children safe and families together. Two examples of internal DCFS change include a regional office with staff dedicated to prevention and another that has workers stationed in elementary schools.

The bottom line is government cannot do it alone. Javier Oliva, a supervisor in the San Fernando Valley regional office, said: “We can’t operate in a vacuum. I mean, it’s not just us. We need everyone’s cooperation, and with the collaborations in the Prevention Initiative, I think everybody is accountable.”

A Regional Office Reaches Out

When the goal is preventing abuse and neglect, the strategy has to include reaching as many vulnerable families as possible before problems turn into crises that require removal of children from their home. The Vermont Corridor DCFS office in SPA 6 is particularly situated to do just that. First of all they have a dedicated staff person, Amber Ellis, whose title is community resource coordinator. She works full time on prevention strategies and, along with her office colleagues, is institutionalizing a process to help families get help sooner.

Ellis’ salary is not supported by PIDP, but she joined the staff of the Vermont Corridor office in 2008 as the initiative was getting underway, and her time is 100 percent devoted to prevention and resource development. Every time the office closes a referral, she sends the family a letter that includes information on resources in their neighborhood, with type of service, agency name, address and phone all listed. Assistant Regional Administrator Pati Cegarra said, “Any referral that’s closed gets the letter and a prevention flyer saying: ‘This is for you to keep. Hang onto it. You can call at any time.’ Our hope and expectation is that someone two months from now, six months from now, will call, and we will be able to help.” Regional Administrator Chuck Tadlock added, “This is a 180-degree turn from where we were 10 years ago when people would never call us.”

Ellis beats the bushes to find resources and make sure she knows every possible avenue for families. “It’s all about networking and I love it,” she said. “It’s calling around and word of mouth and not giving up when they tell you no. You just keep going.” Success can be as simple as finding a church that donates 600 bus tokens a month so that families without cars can get to services and meetings. This church likely would not appear on a formal list of county resources. But it’s this kind of support that gives the Prevention Initiative depth.

All of the regional offices are taking a new look at what’s available in their communities. Tadlock said: “We began to see it was a myth that SPA 6 was resource poor. Maybe it is when compared to some of the other SPAs, but we found there are lots of resources here and people just didn’t know about them. We’re unearthing these resources and connecting the dots.”

After they connect the dots, they spread the word. Ellis and Cegarra make sure they communicate within the office as much as outside it. Cegarra said: “It’s not just a matter of getting the community to trust us. It’s a matter of us trusting ourselves.” So she talks up success stories to her colleagues and compliments workers whose clients are successful.

Ellis said she tries to make it easy for her colleagues: “When I go to unit meetings with the social workers, I ask them to throw a bunch of forms and flyers in the car.” If a family doesn’t have groceries, for example, the social worker can circle food on the form and drop it off at Ellis’ desk for follow-up. This saves the social workers’ time and gets help faster for the families.

Word of mouth plays a big role in the outreach. “It’s not just the flyer,” Cegarra said. “It’s this family telling this other family telling this other family. It’s this agency telling this other agency.” And so the word is out: If a family needs help, they call one of the PIDP agencies. Or they call DCFS. This is a major change in everyday business at DCFS.

The Vermont Corridor office of DCFS has another advantage: It is co-located with other county departments that handle general relief, mental health and child support. Some 50,000 people come through the doors in a given month, which itself is a networking opportunity not to be missed. Amber Ellis “walks the line” on days when families come in to apply for or check on their public assistance or food stamps. She gives them the flyer and talks to them about available services and where to get help.

Co-location also means families can get support quickly from more than one agency at a time. Tadlock spoke of a client “who had five children and was homeless. The staff walked across the hall to DPSS and said, ‘We need help.’ We got help for her within five minutes.”

Tadlock has been at DCFS since the 1960s and has seen huge changes in how social workers get help for families. “When I started, every social worker had a little 3-by-5 card file of resources,” he said. “And you did not tell anybody else where your resources were. There weren’t enough to share, so your little file box was yours and for your clients only.” DCFS has traveled a long road from hoarding card files to the computerized, accessible data banks of resources for all to share.

School-based Social Workers

In SPA 2, which covers a large portion of the San Fernando Valley, PIDP is helping to bring DCFS into the community, literally. A unit of emergency response workers sits in elementary schools. This is an important prevention strategy because schools are the primary source of referrals to DCFS. Alberto Miro, DCFS assistant regional administrator, said it is a “no-brainer” to have social workers onsite in schools to help families with problems before they turn into full-fledged crises, “I don’t know why it has taken so long,” he said.

Sometimes children come to school with dirty clothes or haven’t changed clothes. In the past, teachers might have called this in for neglect.

One of the ZIP codes in SPA 2 includes Pacoima and Arleta, which have high levels of poverty. The volume of child abuse reports from that ZIP code justifies a full unit of six DCFS workers who have a mandate to include prevention among their regular duties. The unit began in two charter schools, each with two workers, one of whom is fluent in Spanish. A public elementary school is next in line.

These social workers are available to school staff, as well as to students and their parents. They conduct informal assessments at the school and connect families with community services and resources, based on need. If there is a safety concern, they help teachers and staff – all of whom are mandated reporters – learn when to call the Child Protection Hotline and how to initiate a traditional child welfare investigation.

Community outreach is key to stationing DCFS staff in the schools. Workers attend neighborhood meetings, where they explain DCFS and offer information on non-DCFS prevention services available in the community. They brought in a speaker on financial literacy, for example, and a director of a mentoring program. Javier Oliva, the supervisor of the unit, said: “It’s educating (school) staff. It’s educating the community. It’s educating community-based organizations.” Miro of DCFS added: “We get educated, too.” The goal, he explained, is not to duplicate the services a school already provides, but to complement them.

Pacoima Charter Elementary School. Linda Garcia-Carillo is one of two emergency response workers based at Pacoima Charter Elementary School. Teachers come to her with concerns about behavioral issues, and she contacts the family to follow up. If a child comes to school crying, she said, “I talk to the child and figure out

what's going on at home. Then I can follow up with the family and make referrals for services if needed.”

Sometimes, she said, children come to school with dirty clothes or haven't changed clothes. In the past, teachers might have called this in for neglect. “A lot of times it is poverty,” she said, “but if it gets called in, it's on the family's record. And we could make all the difference by just giving them free clothing.”

Garcia-Carrillo has good connections with the staff at the front desk of her school; these are the people who really know what's going on. She also works closely with a probation officer based at a housing project across the street from her school. He refers families to her, which is an example of cross-agency collaboration.

“We do whatever we can to prevent a referral from coming in,” she said. “This saves the hotline for things that are more serious.” One case that could have been avoided involved a child who came to school with what looked like a large bruise on his face. The police were called. When they washed his face, the bruise disappeared. “The point of having us stationed at the school,” she said, “is so they can call us instead of the hotline.”

For Garcia-Carrillo, work is different now: “There is more community interaction. When I first started, parents would never approach me. Now they feel more comfortable. It's like ‘Good morning! How are you?’ Parents see us in a positive way. They know we want to prevent kids and families from getting involved in the system.”

The benefits of stationing workers in schools are clear. Workers intercept problems. They educate teachers and parents. There are no significant added costs. “It's amazing when you start venturing out of the office and connecting with other entities,” Miro said. “It's a total different world out there in terms of services, in terms of people's willingness to collaborate with you.” A DCFS veteran of 25 years, Miro said he has seen what is akin to a “total cultural change” in the last two or three years.

Case Story: The School Connection in Action

DCFS supervisor Javier Oliva tells the story of a young student who had very bad teeth. The school referred the mother to a free dental clinic, but she didn't follow up. She was a single mom with eight kids. She was defensive and wanted nothing to do with DCFS.

The social worker spoke with the school's community worker, who went to the home and found the family living in a garage. They cooked on a barbecue grill inside the garage, and there was broken glass on the floor. “It was pretty dangerous and we had to intervene,” Oliva said.

DCFS took all eight children into custody. But by the time of her TDM meeting before the court hearing, the mother had cleaned up and was living in the main house with a friend. Oliva said: “She agreed to start complying and take the kids to the dentist. We explained to her that we could have helped without taking the kids away as part of our school-based program. Based on the cleanliness of the house and on mom's turnaround, we made a decision to return the kids.” DCFS connected her to additional services and support, and the family stayed together.

Faith-Based Support For Families

Churches and other faith institutions always have been a source of support for troubled families. For people in crisis, churches and other religious organizations are often high on the list of places to turn to for support. Building on this connection is a natural for the Prevention Initiative, and the faith community is stepping up in numerous ways.

Family Visitation Centers

Monitored visits are often a prerequisite for parents to get their children back from DCFS custody. Social workers supervise these sometimes tense and often emotional meetings between parents and their children. DCFS visitation rooms are usually small, impersonal and often dingy. They also are crowded, especially if the family has several children.

Bill Bedrossian, a DCFS regional administrator in SPA 8, coordinates the Faith-Based Council. He believes the visitation process in DCFS offices “creates a lot of anxiety.” Even if they meet outside the office, it is not ideal, he said. Fast-food restaurants are too loud. Parks are full of distractions and children are running around. The Faith-Based Council believes churches and other religious institutions are more suitable places for parents to spend quality time with their children.

“When my family first came into this space, they said ‘Wow.’ They were all smiles.”

—Judi Longfellow, volunteer monitor
Parkcrest Christian Church

The SPA 8 network decided to use some of their PIDP funds to try out a church-based Family Visitation Center. Pastor Mike Ellingsen at Parkcrest Christian Church in Lakewood took the concept to his congregation. At the first meeting, almost 30 church members stepped up. He said: “It was amazing how many people just jumped on board and said ‘I want to help. I want to be a part of this.’” Susan Flanagan, the first member to join up, said: “It’s good and it’s right and we want to make a difference. And frankly, we’re called to it.”

The Parkcrest Family Visitation Center is now a large, friendly room full of children’s books and toys, all neatly placed on shelves or in cabinets.

There is a kitchen and an enclosed patio for children and parents to play together outside. There’s a tricycle on the patio. A camera and photo printer help chronicle good times.

It wasn’t always like this, however. The monitors and Pastor Ellingsen say the room was a pretty dreary place before they transformed it into a visitation center. Pastor Ellingsen said: “We put together a wish list of things we needed and set up a display on the patio on Sunday mornings for a couple of months. People took a card and ownership of that particular wish.” That’s how they got things like a playpen, a high chair and books. Volunteers totally renovated the space, laying new carpets, building cabinets and painting. They even got new windows for the space. Now, Susan Flanagan said: “It is a room for healing.”

The Way It Works. Social workers make referrals for families to use the visitation center, and two supervisors coordinate the scheduling. There are currently 12 monitors or coaches at Parkcrest who donate their time. DCFS offices are usually open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., so the fact that coaches can be there after hours and on weekends is a huge benefit for parents who work during the day.

The coaches undergo background checks and participate in two days of training. They learn to observe, to understand verbal and nonverbal cues, when to intervene and how to handle potentially tense drop-off and pick-up times. They get the basics about DCFS structure and process. They also learn how to deal with their own

emotions around issues such as attachment.

Family meetings last anywhere from 90 minutes to two hours, with a few extending to three hours. This gives families time to prepare a meal together and do some of the normal things that families do. Bedrossian said: “It lets them kind of unwind and relax, and really just be themselves.”

Pastor Ellingsen makes a point to introduce himself to every family. Because Parkcrest has a food bank and other resources, he often can help families with basic needs.

The coaches and Pastor Ellingsen are not there to proselytize. Instead, their role is to be a helping hand in a controlled and supportive environment.

The coaches at Parkcrest are not paid. Although it was an option in the beginning, they felt the work should be part of their ministry. (Another visitation center, at Seaside Community United Church in Torrance, pays coaches a small stipend.)

The coaches at Parkcrest began seeing families in October 2008 and have monitored about 100 visits for 35 families since then. Coaches fill out an evaluation form for DCFS after every visit, commenting on parent-child interaction and other issues. They have the social workers' phone numbers in case of questions.

Case Story: A Coach at Work

Judi Longfellow has a full-time job in human resources. The family she monitors at Parkcrest, with four children in three different foster care placements, comes three times a week for a total of seven hours. Longfellow, who monitors one of those meetings, said: “This mom really wants her kids back.”

Longfellow said the room is welcoming: “When my family first came into this space, they said ‘Wow.’ They were all smiles.” It is so different from the DCFS office where they had previous visits – six people (mom, social worker and four kids) in a small room and lots of commotion outside. The older boy wanted to move into the space at Parkcrest.

The mother was abrasive at first, Longfellow recalled, but that changed fairly quickly. Longfellow said: “I think that when families find out we are volunteering and that it comes from our heart, it really opens their eyes to know there are people who care. My mom said to me, ‘I’ve been screwed so much in my life that I’ve gotten to a point where I trust nobody.’ Now she hugs me. She’s moving in a positive direction now. She’s going to her own church and getting positive reinforcement there.”

Longfellow’s DCFS family was not able to be together on Christmas, so they planned their own early Christmas dinner at Parkcrest. “We had Chinese food and hot cocoa,” she said. “They would never have been able to do this at DCFS.” She added that the kids had never had hot cocoa before, so it was a first.

The mother in the family is taking parenting classes and has a court date in July. She hopes to bring her children home.

The Difference It Makes. The Family Visitation Center at Parkcrest is a gift to the families who use it. The center provides a community of support and gives them time to be themselves. It also makes life easier for the social workers, giving them added time for other families who need more intensive help than the families referred to Parkcrest.

There are additional advantages. The image of DCFS in the community is improving. Longfellow and Flanagan pointed out that they knew little about DCFS before becoming coaches, except what they read in the media and the stories they heard. Longfellow said her dealings with DCFS social workers have been wonderful: “You can see they are passionate about kids.”

The coaches’ perception of families in the system is also changing. “Unless you’ve been involved, it’s easy to judge the parents,” Flanagan said. “But a second chance is a good thing for them. And I’ve found from the two families that I have, that no matter what happened at home, the kids want to be with their parents. This is a learning experience for me as much as it is for them.”

As for the families who come to the Parkcrest Visitation Center, the news is good. One family already has been reunited, which was cause for celebration. There is hope for more. In the meantime, other SPAs are interested in the Family Visitation Centers model.

Faith in Action: Grace Resource Center

SPA 1 is “over the hill,” as the locals say, in the high desert of Antelope Valley. It is the largest by far of the eight DCFS SPAs when it comes to land mass, but the smallest in terms of population. And unlike the rest of heavily-populated Los Angeles County, SPA 1 is largely rural, which presents unique challenges when it comes to prevention. Poverty is extensive; services are not.

“The premise of Grace (Resource Center) is that we can all do a lot more together than any one of us can do alone.”

—Steve Baker, executive director
Grace Resource Center

Grace Resource Center is a non-denominational, faith-based organization in Lancaster and the lead agency for the Prevention Initiative in SPA 1. Its mission is to eliminate hunger in Antelope Valley, and the center feeds about 8,000 people a month. Not surprisingly, the first thing you are likely to be asked when you walk into their office is: “Could you use a dozen eggs?”

The staff at Grace interprets the center’s mission broadly so that eliminating hunger incorporates other needs, such as clothing, shelter, furniture, education, job training and family support. And this fits right into the work of the Prevention Initiative.

Casey, Sarah and their 9-month-old baby Isaac came to Grace for diapers and food, but got far more than that. DCFS removed Isaac from his parents when he was born, in part because he tested positive for drugs. The young parents had been homeless, living in their car and struggling with alcohol and substance abuse. Neither parent had a job and the family was receiving no government support.

“Without Grace, I don’t know if our family would have got back together,” Casey said. “Now we’re on welfare, and I’m looking for work.” In addition to diapers and food, Grace helped them with housing, getting the car fixed, a support group and counseling. Casey added: “They follow up. They want to make sure you’re doing good.”

Grace offers computer classes, a welfare-to-work class and more. Graduates go back to school or get a job. Bill Bennett, the SPA 1 Prevention Coordinator at Grace, said: “Then they come back to help us out. Our philosophy is to teach people to fly, not just survive.” Bennett goes to TDMs with DCFS families, ready to offer help from Grace and its partners in SPA 1.

Steve Baker is pastor, founder and executive director of Grace Resource Center. “The premise of Grace is that we

can all do a lot more together than any one of us can do alone,” he said. “We can do some things DCFS can’t do. Social workers send referrals to us, and we help with groceries. Or parents have done everything and are ready to get the kids back, but they don’t have beds. We can do this.”

Many opportunities have opened to Grace since they joined the Prevention Initiative. “We’ve quietly done our thing and witnessed amazing miracles,” Baker said.

Grace doesn’t require any religious involvement. Baker said: “If you look into Christ’s M.O., he usually fed people and then he helped them. How you eliminate hunger is to get people getting along, get them trained, increase their family income, give them some basic life skills, love ‘em up, encourage them, and if they fall, stand them up and put them in the right direction. And then get out of their way.”

Impact Of The Prevention Initiative

When you're talking about a short-term initiative with a big-time goal and the topic is as complex as prevention, proof takes time. But even in just one year of PIDP, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of impact and triumph, illustrated through the stories of families whose needs have been met, a child welfare agency that is rethinking its role in prevention and communities that are changing all across this large and diverse county.

The families who have been served through PIDP tell a compelling story. The parents may not know their experience is part of something called PIDP. But they do know that they did not lose their children to the system, or that they got their children back. And they know their family is in a more stable place.

A formal and collaborative evaluation, both qualitative and quantitative, is nearing completion. There are evaluators on the team from four universities who bring a wide range of experience. Evaluation components include surveys, focus groups and interviews, as well as an examination of management information system data. Local organizations and families weighed in on designing the survey questions.

Preliminary evaluation findings indicate that something positive and different is going on in Los Angeles County. For example:

- The PIDP networks have reached thousands of people and leveraged resources to develop a wide range of strategies and services to help families.
- Promising strategies are being developed around decreasing social isolation, increasing economic stability and integrating a community-based spectrum of prevention services.
- DCFS administrators in most of the regional offices have been active participants in planning and implementation, and line staff are beginning to learn how to make optimal use of the PIDP networks to help strengthen families.

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Strengths and Assets

The stories in this report are about change, one family at a time, one network at a time. Each family is unique, but the stories as a whole illustrate critical changes taking place at DCFS and in the community. It is now ordinary business at DCFS for workers to look for strengths and assets in each family they serve. In just one year, the Prevention Initiative has given birth to its own set of assets, including:

- **A new generation of leaders.** The Prevention Initiative is developing a growing band of new leaders in the community. These include volunteers at the Family Visitation Centers, NAC members who are gaining confidence to speak out on behalf of themselves and others, navigators, cultural brokers and parent advocates. These grassroots leaders of the future know what it means to work in partnership with

government to build strong communities and support strong families.

- **Expanded vision in the community.** Community organizations have changed how they work. Steve Baker of Grace Resource Center acknowledged that “life is way more complicated when you work with DCFS.” But Grace and other community agencies have expanded their vision. They are doing more work and doing it differently, with new and deepening lines of communication to DCFS.
- **Internal support at DCFS for prevention.** Leadership is growing at DCFS as social workers and managers become better partners with the community. This is particularly true among managers in the regional offices. Laura Valles, a member of the Casey Family Programs’ technical assistance team, said: “The regional offices understand why working across the prevention spectrum makes sense for the department. They have gone to a much more profound, more comprehensive, partnership-oriented vision of their work.”
- **Real social work.** DCFS workers say over and over that they are finally getting to do the social work they are trained to do. Kimala Lewis, a supervisor in the Pasadena office, said: “If I had to say one thing about PIDP, I would say it’s real social work. And from the perspective of a die-hard, blood-bleeding social worker, that’s a huge statement. It’s what I think we should be doing, the opportunity to look at our families and see them with strengths and have the ability to provide them with a support network that gives them the ability to use those strengths to be successful.”
- **Spreading the ideas.** The enthusiasm in the field for the Prevention Initiative is contagious. The SPA networks across the county meet regularly to share stories and lessons they are learning. Supervisor Kimala Lewis predicted that the work will spread: “I don’t think it’s going to take much to believe in this. I mean, all it takes is just a couple of social workers to say, ‘Whew, that sure did help.’” When DCFS social workers change, DCFS changes.
- **Overcoming competition.** Agencies in the community, some of which saw each other as competitors in the past, also are working differently among themselves. In SPA 7, the lead agencies never had worked together before. Colleen Mooney, SBCC executive director, facilitated the initial meetings between the agencies, and they are now working off the same page. With help from the Casey Family Programs’ technical assistance team in SPA 4, the three large, independent and well-established lead agencies worked through a number of issues as they built their partnership. Licha Drake of the Children’s Bureau, one of the three, said: “It takes time to step back and try something new. We had to come together and work through what we as a whole would like the PIDP vision to be. Through that process, we built our own relationship with each other. In fact, we’ve gone after grants together now.”
- **Foster care placements continue to decrease.** Despite fears that the economic crisis would lead to more children in foster care, the number of children in placement continues to decrease, dipping below 16,000 in April and dropping even further in May (to 15,748). This is a far cry from a decade ago, when nearly 50,000 children were in foster care. Many factors influence foster care entries. But Regional Administrator Chuck Tadlock speculated that “a lot of the prevention work that we’ve been doing over the past year has possibly kept referrals from developing, that people were able to find resources and resolve issues or get hooked up with community groups.”

Concerns and Challenges

The PIDP networks will need to hold onto these strengths as they face new and ongoing challenges and concerns. Many, if not most, of these concerns center on finding adequate funding to keep the momentum going forward.

- **The economy.** The recession continues to be the 800-pound gorilla in the room and it is gaining weight in Los Angeles. Families in the PIDP communities were struggling with poverty long before the current economic crisis. Loss of jobs grew over the year, which has resulted in an increasing demand for basic necessities of life, such as food and housing. Leaders are concerned that the impact of the recession will continue to hit low-income Los Angeles communities hardest and they will take longer to recover. A state budget crisis only adds to the worries, especially if threatened cuts to public assistance go through.
- **The depth of the need.** The community networks have come far, and the promise is great. But Audrey Tousant of SHIELDS said “The demand is deep. My staff, including me, is only 11 people. That’s not enough. I’d like an outreach coordinator, two navigators at each site instead of one, plus administrators, plus more legal help.” Navigator Sharron Eason added: “You’re trying to help one person, and the couch is filled with people waiting. And you don’t want to lose them. You need to spend at least an hour with each person to listen to their story. It takes time to figure out what they need.”
- **Uneven implementation.** Progress varies across the SPAs. Collaborative planning between a government agency and multiple community organizations is a challenge anywhere, but especially in Los Angeles County, where every community and every partnership is markedly different. The SPAs chose different approaches for implementation. The evaluation notes that DCFS offices that had long-standing relationships with community organizations were able to move faster than those with less history of collaboration. Ruben Gonzales, a member of the Casey Family Programs team of consultants, likened the process to enthusiastic students studying ballroom dance: “A little awkward and some stepping on toes, but intent is everything.” What held it together, he said, was “uniformity around the values and a framework that allowed for diversity of approach based on needs and strengths.”
- **Working with other departments and the judiciary.** DCFS and its partners in the community are not the only ones concerned about families in need. Mental health, public assistance, probation, education and the judiciary all come into contact with the same families. With a few exceptions, other county departments have no formal role in PIDP, but initiatives such as Linkages have begun to reach across bureaucratic barriers. Deepening and broadening these efforts is an important task for the future.

Sustainability and the Cost of Prevention

Long before DCFS and the county voiced their support with \$5 million for a second year of PIDP, the partnerships were talking about how to sustain the work. Chrissie Castro of Casey Family Programs’ consulting team noted: “I don’t think people ever thought they’d do something for 12 months and it would then just go away. They were looking at other opportunities to keep it going.” Keeping it going also means expansion, since the vast size of Los Angeles County and the small budget for PIDP meant most of the SPAs focused their work on only a few ZIP codes or neighborhoods.

The Prevention Initiative does not involve a lot of extra internal expenditures for DCFS. Rick Bryant, acting deputy director and former regional administrator in SPA 1, said the initiative “doesn’t have a definable workload impact on social workers.” It means they have to spend more of their time doing work in the communities they serve, he said. But when prevention is successful, it also means fewer children need to come into the system, which lowers caseloads and costs.

For the community organizations in the partnerships, sustainability does rest on funding. Staff positions for cultural brokers, parent advocates, community organizers and navigators must be funded. Services in the community must be revved up and maintained to respond to families’ needs. The Prevention Initiative is only a small

part of the work of the PIDP nonprofit partners, and they are stretched thin.

PIDP evaluators observed in early findings that DCFS and the community agencies involved in this small demonstration project have done an excellent job of blending funds from a variety of sources for maximum impact. The original \$5 million from PIDP intersected with so many other funding streams that it was sometimes hard to figure out who did what with which pocket of money. This funding synergy is one of the initiative's greatest strengths.

The leaders of PIDP know that continuing to leverage existing funds, as well as finding new support, is critical. PIDP was by design a one-year, demonstration project. Now it has the bonus of a second year. The goal is not to extend PIDP forever, but to expand the successful elements and concepts and merge them with new and existing practices, which will sustain the work and strengthen Los Angeles County families and communities.

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Conclusion



Nothing is more effective than preventing a family from falling apart, than keeping a family intact and keeping children with parents who love them but are having trouble surviving day to day. Government can never replace the love and care an adult provides for a child, no matter how much money we spend, no matter how many programs we create. So to create a network whose sole purpose is to prevent families from entering our system in the first place – and for those parents who have entered our system, to give them the support so that their children can be returned quickly – is absolutely critical.

—Miguel Santana, deputy chief executive officer, County of Los Angeles



PIDP brought a small amount of money to a big vision in a county with a huge heart.

For DCFS to embrace prevention is a change from the norm in the child welfare field. Usually child welfare agencies focus attention and funds on families already in the system, and community organizations are left to support everyone else. This bifurcated approach is breaking down in Los Angeles, at least in the neighborhoods involved in the Prevention Initiative.

Best practice is the integration of all three strategies in each SPA – decreasing family isolation, supporting family economic stability and building access to integrated services in the community. At a recent PIDP meeting, leaders used the analogy of a rope, with three braided strands. The blending of the strands makes the whole stronger than any of the parts. If any one of the strands is pulled out, the rope may not hold.

Best practice also means helping families regardless of where they fall on the child welfare continuum. Ultimately, like all good social work, successful prevention comes down to relationships.

“This is person to person work,” said Susan Kaplan, executive director of Friends of the Family. “And no matter how much we try to wrap it up into these glamorous and glorious programs, in the end, change happens because of a person to person interaction.” This is why there are so many heroes in this story and why PIDP has so many moving parts that it looks like the Los Angeles freeways.

The energy level of those involved in the Prevention Initiative is palpable. No one government agency, no one community organization, no one network, no one SPA, will make the difference. But together they are changing the dynamics in the community.

Together, they make up Langston Hughes’ “community of hands,” tilling the soil and harnessing the power of the waters to create a strong and lasting safety net for families and children.

Service Planning Areas in Los Angeles County

Los Angeles County is the largest county in the nation, home to more than 10 million people and larger than all but seven states. It is also one of the most culturally and ethnically mixed areas in the U.S. The county is divided into eight geographic Service Planning Areas, or SPAs, some of which are larger than some states. The SPAs are:

SPA 1, Antelope Valley, population 333,276, covers the high desert of the Antelope Valley and is the largest geographic area in the county, but has the smallest population. More than 27 percent of the children in SPA 1 live in families with incomes below the federal poverty line, and almost half live in low-income families (200 percent of the poverty level). There are two DCFS regional offices in SPA 1: Palmdale and Lancaster.

SPA 2, San Fernando, population 2,129,333, includes the San Fernando Valley section of the City of Los Angeles, as well as other incorporated cities stretching into the Santa Clarita Valley. SPA 2 has the largest population in the county. Sixteen percent of children live in families with incomes below the poverty level; 35 percent of children live in low-income families. There are two DCFS offices in SPA 2: San Fernando Valley and Santa Clarita.

SPA 3, San Gabriel Valley, population 1,834,677, includes a number of smaller cities in the northeast region of the county and is known for a mixture of wealthier and poorer communities. Eighteen percent of the children live in families with incomes below the poverty level and 41 percent in low-income families. SPA 3 includes four DCFS regional offices: Glendora, El Monte, Pomona and Pasadena.

SPA 4, Metro, population, 1,190,448 covers the core of the City of Los Angeles—downtown LA and the densely populated surrounding areas that have lower-cost housing and large numbers of recent immigrants. Poverty is high in SPA 4, with more than 35 percent of children living in families below the poverty level, and more than 64 percent in low-income families. Metro North is the only regional DCFS office in SPA 4.

SPA 5, West, population 651,084, includes many of the county's most affluent sections. Less than 9 percent of children live in families with incomes below the poverty level; 19 percent live in low-income families. SPA 5 includes one DCFS regional office, West LA.

SPA 6, South, population 1,078,548, the southern central area of the county, includes many of the poorest sections of the City of Los Angeles, Compton and other unincorporated communities such as Florence-Firestone. Poverty rates are high, with almost 40 percent of children living in families below the poverty line and nearly 70 percent living in low-income families. There are three regional DCFS offices in SPA 6: Compton, Wateridge, and Vermont Corridor.

SPA 7, East, population 1,405,922, is located in the southeastern portion of the county and known for a large number of smaller cities and a mix of new immigrant and established residents. Slightly more than 21 percent of the children live in families with incomes below the poverty level, and 47 percent live in low-income families. There are two DCFS regional offices: Belvedere and Santa Fe Springs.

SPA 8, South Bay/Harbor, population 1,545,275, is in the southern-most section of the county. More than 22 percent of children live in families with incomes below the poverty level and 43 percent in low-income families. There are two DCFS regional offices in SPA 8: Lakewood and Torrance.

The American Indian Children's Council (AICC) is a countywide body working across the eight SPAs to ensure that American Indian children are not overlooked in county planning efforts. It is the only non-geographic council because of the unique nation-to-nation relationship that tribes share with the federal government and, by extension, with local county government. Los Angeles County is home to the largest urban American Indian population in the country.

Data from 2008 Los Angeles County Children's ScoreCards based on 2006 data.
Descriptions from 2009 PIDP outcomes and evaluation report.



Note: City names are shown in **BLACK**.
Communities are shown in **GRAY**.

August 2002
Los Angeles County
Children's Planning Council
Data Partnership (213) 893-0421

LA County	
Total Population: 10,088,274	
Ethnic Breakdown	
Latino:	47.0%
White:	28.9%
Asian Pacific Islander:	12.5%
African American:	9.0%
Two or More Races:	2.0%
Other:	0.2%
American Indian:	.03%
Source: United Way, 2005	



Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately prevent the need for—foster care. Established by UPS founder Jim Casey in 1966, the foundation provides direct services and promotes advances in child welfare practice and policy.

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