Judge Michael Nash
a Champion of Children

Three and one-half years ago, Judge Michael Nash retired after nearly three decades as a judge and 16 years as the Presiding Judge of the Dependency Court of Los Angeles. He was known to voice dismay at the tragedy of the lives of people who are defendants in the criminal justice system and this concern was magnified by his awareness of the plight of the children and families in the Juvenile Division. His retirement was short lived, and, when the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors created an Office for the Protection of Children, they wooed Judge Nash out of retirement to head the agency. Below is a brief interview with Judge Nash.

What enticed you to take this new position? I saw this as an opportunity to continue a lot of work I had been doing in the court for so many years. As the presiding judge of the Juvenile Court, I had the goal of bringing folks together to foster greater communication, coordination and collaboration amongst all the players in LA County that work with children and families. I saw how there needed to be a greater sense of urgency on how we approach these issues related to child protection in LA County. That coordination now includes the social workers, the workers from mental health, the children’s lawyers, and the representatives from the residential facilities themselves.

Have you seen changes? Yes, but I will never be satisfied. There is still too much to do. There are too many people to help. When I started in the Dependency Court in 1990, we had close to 60,000 children under the jurisdiction of the Dependency Court. Ten or 15 years later that number was under 24,000 and everyone joked that we had reduced those numbers. My attitude was, oh, we’ve done pretty well, but we still have 24,000 kids under the jurisdiction of the court. That’s not good enough.

What lays ahead for your team? We’re expanding the network of prevention and aftercare networks. We’re starting to see an increase in home visiting programs; we’re just getting started on expanding our goal of early care and education programs.

“Those kids who come into this system through no fault of their own...100% of them have been victims of abuse and neglect. Every single one of them has been traumatized and when our government, takes them into our care...in effect we become their parents and we have an obligation to be the best parents possible.”

How do we more efficiently and effectively assess the mental health needs of children on the front end as they enter the system so that there will be fewer of them at the back end who have to enter our transitional shelter care facilities? If we can do a better job for some of those children at the front end they won’t be recycling through these facilities so often. There are also children in congregate care who aren’t going to go home. Places like Hathaway Sycamores play a critical role in helping to prepare youth who can transition out of the system when they reach a certain age. These facilities can build the families of the children together to prepare them to go home.

The system is about caring for one child at a time...change one child you change the world. We can’t be satisfied until there are zero children in the system.

Transitional Shelter Care (TSC) has had 503 opportunities to shelter youth this year, 56 more than last year’s total of 447.

Even with higher volumes of youth, TSC staff have managed to find safe living spaces for 316 youth under the 72 hour target, 44 more than last year’s accomplishment of 272 placements within 72 hours.