

Evaluation of Los Angeles County's Upfront Family Finding Program | Phase 2 *Executive Summary*

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Introduction

Nationally, more than 250,000 children enter foster care each year as the result of abuse or neglect, and more than 400,000 children and youth are in out-of-home care at any time (U.S. DHHS, 2020). Over the past decades, child welfare agencies have strived to identify and engage relatives with whom children can be placed or maintain close connections during and after their time in foster care. Previous research has found that, while in foster care, children placed with relatives experience greater placement stability and have better mental health and behavioral outcomes than children placed with non-relatives (Winokur et al, 2018). Additionally, children placed with relatives continue to reach permanency (reunification, guardianship, or adoption) and have lower rates of re-entry than children placed with non-relatives (Winokur et al, 2018, Wheeler & Vollet, 2017). Many agencies, including Los Angeles County's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), have implemented relative search and engagement programs, known as "family finding," to strengthen children's family connections and to enhance the likelihood that children can live with kin when they are unable to remain at home.

Before implementing the Upfront Family Finding (UFF) program, DCFS focused its family finding efforts on children who had been in care for long periods of time. With UFF, which started in October 2016 in two local "pilot" offices (Glendora and Santa Fe Springs) and has now expanded to 10 offices, specialized workers in the Permanency Partners Program (P3) conduct family finding when children are first removed from their home. P3 workers serve children not initially placed with relatives, but the importance of finding and engaging relatives for placement and other supports for all children is emphasized to all staff in the offices implementing UFF. In 2018, Child Trends completed Phase 1 of the [UFF evaluation](#) in the two pilot offices and found that UFF resulted in increased relative placements, although findings related to the stability of relative placements and timely reunification were mixed. In 2020, Child Trends completed Phase 2 of the evaluation to analyze longer-term outcomes for children placed with relatives in the pilot offices and to examine the program's implementation and outputs as well as short-term outcomes for children in the six UFF "expansion" offices that began implementing the program in 2019.¹ This report summarizes the findings from the Phase 2 evaluation.

¹ The six UFF expansion offices are: South County, Belvedere, West San Fernando Valley, Santa Clarita, Wateridge, and Hawthorne. The first four began UFF in May 2019, and the latter two began in November 2019. Two additional offices, West LA and VT Corridor, began implementing UFF in January 2018. They were not included in this study because implementation was not during the same timeframe.

Study Methodology

Phase 2 of the UFF evaluation included outcome and implementation studies. The goals were to:

- Examine longer-term outcomes for children placed with relatives (initially or subsequently) in the pilot offices compared to children placed with relatives in offices not implementing UFF (comparison offices). Outcomes were drawn from administrative data, California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) and included: placement stability, reunification, adoption/guardianship, subsequent allegation, and re-entry.
 - The study compares children placed with relatives through UFF to children *also placed with relatives* in offices not implementing UFF to isolate the effects of UFF specifically, not relative care more generally. As noted above, the benefits of relative placement (versus non-relative placement) for children in foster care are well established by previous research.
- Describe the program and identify successes or barriers to implementing UFF in the expansion offices through interview and focus group findings.
- Examine relative identification and engagement for children served by P3 workers in the expansion offices. Ideally, we would have also investigated relative engagement for children in the comparison offices, but these data are collected only by P3 workers and are not available in the administrative data.
- Measure the program's effect on relative placement, relative placement stability, and reunification for all children in the expansion offices and the subpopulation of children not initially placed with relatives.

For this study, a relative placement was defined as a foster care placement with kin or with a non-relative extended family member (NREFM). Examples of NREFMs include teachers, medical professionals, neighbors, and family friends. The term "relative" in this report includes kin and NREFMs. Relative placements in our study did not include instances where children were released to non-offending parents because these situations are not included in CWS/CMS as relative foster care placements. As a result, we were unable to track placement, safety, and permanency outcomes for these children in a rigorous way. Los Angeles County's Office of Child Protection (OCP), however, does include children released to non-offending parents when reporting on the percentage of children in the UFF offices placed initially with family upon removal from their homes, because releasing children to non-offending parents effectively maintains family connections. Information about release to non-offending parents is recorded separately by staff in UFF offices and reported to OCP.

Long-term Outcome Findings (Pilot Offices)

- **UFF did not change the likelihood that, once placed with a relative, children move to a non-relative placement.** Children placed with relatives through UFF were equally likely to consistently stay with relatives (either with their first or subsequent relative placements) during their time in foster care as compared to children placed with relatives in DCFS offices not implementing UFF.
 - We did find, however, that UFF increased the probability that a child's first relative placement would disrupt when we measured placement moves to non-relative placements *and* other relatives. P3 staff reported that, to place children more quickly with relatives, workers in UFF pilot offices sometimes placed children in short-term relative placements while readying another relative for a longer-term placement. Children in comparison offices were less likely to be placed with relatives, and those who were placed with relatives were not placed as quickly; however, they were less likely to leave their first relative placement for another relative's home.
- **Overall, UFF did not change the likelihood that children placed with relatives would reunify with their parents.** For all children placed with relatives in both pilot offices, UFF had no effect on

reunification. However, for the subpopulation of children not initially placed with relatives, children served by P3 workers had a lower likelihood of reunifying, a finding driven by the Santa Fe Springs office. This finding could be unique to Santa Fe Springs because UFF had no effect on reunification for children in Glendora or in the six expansion offices.

- **UFF was associated with an increase in the likelihood that a child placed with relatives would be adopted or have a finalized guardianship.** This was true across the two pilot offices and for all children as well as children not initially placed with relatives, but the finding was stronger in Santa Fe Springs, where reunification had decreased following the implementation of UFF.
- **UFF did not adversely affect child safety.** There was no evidence that UFF influenced the likelihood that children placed with relatives who then exited to permanency (reunification, adoption, or guardianship) would experience a subsequent substantiated maltreatment allegation. Descriptive trends pointed to reductions in re-entry for children who were placed with relatives and then reunified or had a finalized guardianship,² but findings were not statistically significant.

Table 1. Summary of findings from long-term outcomes study, statistically significant effects of UFF noted

	All children placed with relatives	P3 children placed with relatives
Relative placement disruption (to any placement)	Increase	Increase
Relative placement disruption (to a non-relative placement)	None	None
Reunification	None	Decrease
Adoption/guardianship	Increase	Increase ⁺
Subsequent allegation	None	None
Re-entry	None	None

+ Marginally significant increase $p < .10$

Expansion Office Findings

Program outputs and implementation findings

- **Findings from virtual focus groups with staff and administrators from two of the six expansion offices (Wateridge and Hawthorne) indicate implementation of UFF in these offices was similar to the pilot offices.** Challenges and successes identified during focus groups were also similar to the pilot offices, notwithstanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (more below).
- **The COVID-19 pandemic affected the implementation of UFF.** Much of the study period (May 2019 – November 2020) occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early March 2020. COVID-19 affected office operations which in turn hindered communication among staff and staff’s ability to perform many of their job responsibilities, including meeting with families and children in person and approving relatives for placement.
- **An average of 10 relatives were found for children served by P3; all but 9 of the 722 children served by P3 workers during the study period had at least one relative identified.** The average number of

² We could not measure re-entry among children who were adopted since children who re-enter care after adoption are assigned a new unique id in the administrative data system.

relatives identified was lower than the pilot offices, where an average of 17 relatives per child were found. It is not clear why fewer relatives were found, but two possibilities include the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the community's distrust of DCF, raised by focus group participants in some of the expansion offices.

- **P3 workers in the expansion offices were equally likely (compared to the pilot offices) to successfully engage found relatives.** The majority (94%) of P3 children had at least one relative willing to provide some type of support (e.g., phone calls, financial support, transportation).
- **After P3 services ended, more than half of children had caregivers who agreed or strongly agreed that they were benefitting from relative engagement.** Specifically, these caregivers (relative or non-relative foster caregivers or biological parents)³ agreed that the child had more relatives involved in their life, benefitted from relative involvement, and appeared to be more connected with relatives.

Outcome findings

- **UFF increased the probability of relative placement for children who were not initially placed with relatives (those served by P3 workers).** Before UFF was implemented, 32 percent of children not initially placed with relatives had experienced a relative placement within six months. Post-UFF, this increased to 40 percent. When this outcome was examined among the broader group of all newly detained children in the UFF offices, however, there was no statistically significant increase. This differs from the findings from the pilot offices where there was an increase in relative placement for all children, indicating an office-wide impact of the program. We know that, because of COVID-19, the UFF expansion offices were unable to have the same frequent office-wide meetings related to family finding that were held in the pilot offices. In addition, the pandemic limited informal conversations among P3 workers and other staff, likely lessening UFF's office-wide impact.
- **Across the expansion offices, there was no effect of UFF on relative placement disruption when measuring moves to any placement (relative or non-relative) and when measuring moves to non-relative placements only.** We did, however, find some evidence of an increase in relative placement disruption in Service Bureau 1 (South County) when we examined the Service Bureaus separately.⁴
- **Across the expansion offices, we found no effect of UFF on a child's likelihood of reunification.** This was true for all children and for the population of children not initially placed with relatives.

Table 2. Summary of findings from expansion offices outcomes study, statistically significant effects of UFF noted for each outcome of interest

	All children	P3 children
Relative placement disruption (to any placement)	None	Increase
Relative placement disruption (to a non-relative placement)	None	None
Reunification (among children placed with relatives)	None	None

³ The survey respondent was the child's caregiver at the end of P3 services (approximately 90 days after removal); their relationship to the child could be a relative, non-relative, or the biological parent (if the child reunified or was placed with the non-offending parent).

⁴ South County was the only office in Service Bureau 1; the remaining five offices were in Service Bureau 2.

Conclusions

In summary, results from the study of the expansion offices indicate that UFF appears to have been implemented in these offices in a manner similar to the pilot offices (COVID-19 notwithstanding) and that P3 workers are successfully engaging relatives and finding relative placements for children in the program. Findings indicate that the program can be scaled successfully throughout the county. Outcome findings from pilot and expansion offices indicate that more children are being placed with relatives and that these children are equally likely, compared to similar children placed with relatives in offices not implementing UFF, to experience stable placement with relatives and to reach permanency through reunification. Findings from the pilot offices further suggest that children placed with relatives through UFF have a greater likelihood of being adopted or having a finalized guardianship if unable to be reunited with their parents.