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L.A. County Weighs Expanding Rapid Kinship Placement Program

BY JEREMY LOUDENBACK



Los Angeles County is weighing an expansion to its Upfront Family Finding Pilot Project. Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services

Despite an ever-tightening budget, Los Angeles County is considering an expansion of a kinship program that places foster children with relatives as soon as they are removed from their parents' homes, a softer handoff that can reduce the trauma of family separation.

At a cost of \$14.6 million, the program known as Upfront Family Finding is now being piloted at 10 of 20 Department of Children and Family Services offices, designed to provide foster children with an alternative to living in foster homes with people they don't know, or in group care facilities. Under the program, part-time and formerly retired social workers seek out and engage with family members willing to receive the children within their first 90 days in foster care.

A wide body of research over the past two decades has found that children in foster care fare better emotionally, have greater stability when living with relatives and are better able to maintain connections with siblings. The issue has long been a focus for [Michael Nash](#), executive director of the county's Office of Child Protection and a former presiding judge of the juvenile court.

Like many child welfare agencies, Los Angeles County has specialized social workers to find relatives for children who are at risk of exiting care without family connections. But Nash has championed family-finding as a way to provide more stable placements for youth earlier on, in the hopes of avoiding often-rocky paths through the foster care system.

Nash's office is proposing to expand the scope of the Upfront program to include the whole county at an additional cost of \$8.3 million. Officials with the Department of Children and Family Services agree, saying the expansion would "pay dividends," limiting the upheaval of multiple moves and correcting the disproportionate share of Black and Latino children placed in out-of-home care.

"While it might be dollars upfront, it's trauma saved throughout," said Kym Renner, a deputy director with the Department of Children and Family Services.

The proposal will be considered by the Board of Supervisors in the coming weeks. But the additional spending will face heightened scrutiny amid the dire financial outlook for the county caused by the devastation of the coronavirus pandemic. As a result of a county hiring freeze, the Department of Children and Family Services has not added any additional social workers since the start of the pandemic.

Many children's commissioners viewed the plan favorably and called on the county to find a way to continue the work of the Upfront Family Finding pilot.

“At a moment when there's so little new money to access in the county, we should be looking at the resources that we already have and how we can deploy them for this purpose,” Children's Commission President Wendy Garen said at the Monday meeting.

Los Angeles County currently places about 49% of foster children with relatives, a rate that is higher than state and federal averages. But since 2016, offices that have employed Upfront Family Finding pilot have pushed that rate even higher, to 59% this year. Starting in 2016 with two offices before expanding to 10 in 2018, the pilot relies on a specialized cadre of workers focused solely on interviewing family members and searching databases to locate children's relatives.

Nash said their success not only helps children, it also keeps the county in line with state law that says children should always be placed with family whenever possible and that relatives should be speedily notified to help prevent a child's placement with strangers.

Powell described a recent example where Upfront workers stepped in to assist: A 10-year-old Los Angeles boy, Q.B., was removed from the care of his mother in January, along with a half-sister. While his sister was able to stay with her father, Q.B. seemed to be headed for a foster care placement. Powell said thanks to workers with the family-finding pilot, the boy's father and grandfather were located in New York, where he was sent to be cared for by family in March.

Research findings on the program's achievements are expected to be delivered soon to county officials. **Initial results** from the Washington, D.C.-based research firm Child Trends showed children placed with relatives were more likely to find permanent homes through adoption or guardianship when they could not be returned to parents than a comparison group. Those who stayed with relatives were no less likely to return to foster care or experience subsequent maltreatment.

Nina Powell, an administrator with the Department of Children and Family Services who oversees the county's work with relatives, told commissioners that social workers have to

juggle so many responsibilities in the first weeks after a child is removed from their parents, it can be difficult for them to also search and follow up with relatives.

The preliminary findings, however, also showed a more troubling trend for children involved in the pilot project — a reduction in the number of family reunifications, when compared with a control group that did not receive the additional family-finding efforts. More data about the issue won't arrive until the full evaluation is received from Child Trends in February. But Office of Child Protection Director Nash acknowledged the early concerns.

“When children are placed with relatives, the process in certain respects gets relaxed,” Nash said, adding that some social workers may not pay as much attention to the families once the children are comfortably settled, even when many relatives may experience struggles in caring for them.

“With relatives, they get these children suddenly, in the middle of the night,” he said. “They are the ones who need more work, rather than foster parents.”

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