

Sheila Kuehl Charts Path for Nation's Largest Child Welfare System

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As the current chair of Los Angeles County's Board of Supervisors, Sheila Kuehl is in a prominent position to shape child welfare policy that will not only have an impact in L.A., but nationally.

With more than 10 million residents, the county is larger than all but eight states. Accordingly, with nearly 35,000 children served by the county's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), L.A. is home to the largest child welfare system in the nation.

In December, the board welcomed a new director to DCFS, Bobby Cagle, who had most recently run Georgia's foster care system.

In a wide-ranging interview with *The Chronicle of Social Change*, Kuehl – the first openly gay speaker of the California State Senate, a long-time advocate for the rights of women and girls, and a prolific voice for the needs of children and families caught up in the child welfare system – reflected on what new leadership means to L.A. and the nation.

She shared her candid thoughts on what it will mean for LGBTQ foster youth to have a gay man leading the agency that serves them, how to avert child maltreatment and the challenges in recruiting and retaining foster parents.



Supervisor Sheila Kuehl with DCFS's new director at his swearing in on Nov. 29, 2017.

Why did you want to hire Bobby Cagle to lead L.A. County's Department of Children and Family Services?

I really felt that there were three things that made him more attractive to me as a new director of DCFS.

One was his own life experience. There's nothing that substitutes for that.

Although, he was only in an out-of-home placement for not even the first whole year of his life, and his adoptive parents were good. That also makes you appreciate what a difference that makes in your life. You know, to have someone to rely on.

The second thing was that he had run a department of the approximate size of ours, with the approximate number of kids and staff. And the kind of things that he had attempted to institute, and had instituted in Georgia, was just the way we wanted to go. It was not just individual, child-focused, but individual child and family-focused.

We have been moving – over the three years that I've been here – much more to taking a deeper look at whether we can place children with their relatives, keep them in the family with strong support – how to maintain the family without jeopardizing the safety of the children. And his approach in Georgia had been similar.

And we thought that experience of actually doing it – not just talking about it – was very important.

The third thing was that he had also fostered a more collaborative approach.

If you just look at DCFS, you're not going to get at everything. And that was something that he had tried to institute in Georgia. So I thought that made him the better candidate.

I wanted someone who'd had this kind of experience.

Because, you know, Phil Browning [former DCFS director] – for all the good he did in the department – was not a child welfare person. He was a utility player.



CREDIT: L.A. County Board of Supervisors Sheila Kuehl with foster youth and advocates on Jan. 10, when the Board of Supervisors passed a motion regarding the rights of the county's LGBTQ foster youth.

Cagle is an openly gay man. Here in L.A., and across the country, a disproportionately high number of foster youth identify as LGBTQ. What do you think this will mean for L.A.'s gay foster youth?

Well, I think that every time you can see that someone has experienced a little bit of what you've experienced, and they're now in a leadership position, it inspires.

Even at Bobby's age, he and Tim — his partner — had never been allowed, in Georgia, to appear in public together. And so when Tim was there for Bobby's swearing in, up on the dais holding the book, standing next to him, they had their pictures taken. They were both almost in tears, because they had never been able to do that.

That experience informs a lot of the feelings that our kids have — of, you know, how nobody gets them. And I think it's really important that they see that somebody gets them. Variety of life experience is really important.

We want to get at a little more information as to why are 20 percent of all our foster kids LGBTQ. We used to talk about them as "throw-away kids." And that's what they are. Some are runaway, but a lot are throw-away.

“Get out of my house. I don’t want any gay people in my house.”

It’s hard for them.

The county is clearly focused on child maltreatment prevention. In a report submitted to the Board of Supervisors by the Office of Child Protection last summer, the office called for universal home visiting throughout the county. How feasible is that?

I don’t think we’ll ever really reach 100 percent home visitation.

But, as to aspirational goals, I think of it like being in a mine, where you have a light on your hat. And the only way you can actually see a path is you shine a light ahead. That’s what aspirational goals really are.

The Board of Supervisors passed a motion in November maintaining a contract with an outside vendor to help DCFS gauge child safety and risk. This means that the county will continue using Structured Decision Making (SDM), a set of actuarial risk tools used by child welfare investigators and workers. What are your thoughts on risk assessment and the direction the county should take?

Well, we did a pretty deep dive into the problems of SDM.

And then we asked for a real analysis of alternatives. And it was very disappointing that none of the predictive analytics models were trustworthy and satisfactory to me.

It reminds me of Jolly West – Dr. West used to run the neuropsychiatric institute at UCLA. And it was, “Are you crazy or not crazy? Do we need to lock you up?” And I remember the tests that they would give for that always struck me as, I was afraid if I took them, I’d be locked up. I mean they didn’t seem to be the kind of thing that I would trust.

And we had a lot of discussion about it and decided that there was not anything we wanted to move to, because that’s a big move.

Foster care numbers have been going up over recent years, while there has been a decrease in the overall number of foster homes for them to live in. What should the county be doing to ensure that foster children have quality placements?

Do you know why foster care numbers go up?

Well, Peggy Henry [a juvenile dependency court judge in L.A.] would tell you after Gabriel [Fernandez] removals from the home doubled.

And so, suddenly, they were swamped in the court. So it had a lot to do with, “I’m afraid that if I leave this child, they’ll be in danger.” From my point of view, and I’m not the expert, but it looks to me like it’s a lot about that.

It’s the social worker being backed up. I have to say I think 721 [the Union representing L.A. child welfare workers] is also kind of happy with Bobby, because he’s been a social worker.

I don't know if they're ever happy with the boss. But again, it's like a gay kid thinks, "Well, maybe he understands me." A social worker thinks, "Well, maybe he understands me."

The state is currently engaged in reforming the child welfare system, notably by reducing the reliance on group homes. Part of that entailed a \$104 million fund distributed to counties to recruit and retain foster parents. How is that effort going here?

I really think that we do have to recruit and retain [foster parents]. But I think the state hasn't made it that easy for us.

We recruit a family and they don't get paid. We now say, "Well, we're going to try to pay you."

Because now, you have to be qualified if you're a foster family, the same as an adoptive family. It's difficult, it's time consuming, and we're not in charge of it. So we're trying to do some interim payments. But to get that kind of thing off the ground – we haven't even done it yet. So the state is not helping us to recruit.

The other thing is, we finally got the Child Care Bridge money through [to foster parents caring for an infant]. But it's not clear how quickly that gets out.

Because that means, "Yes, we're going to give you money for child care for the first six months." But there is no child care available.

So what have we done to recruit and retain you? Or we say to you, "The court has ordered you to take the child to visit their birth mother. You live in the Palisades, she lives in Gardena. You have to drive that child there twice a week." And I say, "OK. I don't want to do it."

In terms of recruiting and retaining, we have to do everything we can to support the families. That's the retaining part.

And the other thing is, you don't know if you're going to be able to keep this child. Because, very rightly, we're trying to do family reunification. This child has a family.

And you fall in love with this child, and you're fostering this child, and you think you're much better for this child. And the court says, "The parents have gone through all the therapy, they've got a job, they've got a stable place to live. This child's going back to live with them." And it breaks your heart. So it's not easy to be a foster parent.

It's not just, "How come you haven't found a whole bunch more, and here's a whole bunch of money to go find them." It's really understanding their experience.

How well is L.A. County doing in regards to stepping kids down from group care, as the state wants?

I think the suddenness of it – that is a problem.

I don't know if you remember many, many years ago when we [the California legislature] did class-size reduction. We told every school district in the state — and there are a thousand of them — that they needed to reduce the size of classes in zero through three to no more than 20 students. And many of them had 35, 36 students.

There was no attention paid to the facilities that they would need. You had a room but suddenly, now you needed two rooms. So they were buying trailers. It was the right thing to do. But because it was so difficult to carry out, they abandoned it. And we don't have class-size reduction anymore. Also, it took a lot of money.

In a way, CCR [Continuum of Care Reform] is kind of the same thing. We're saying the best thing for kids is not to be in group homes. Although, I think that the judgment is still out for the older kids.

That's a very unpopular thing to say.

I know. But sometimes their communal living was beneficial for them, in terms of friendships. And if the programming is good enough, they kind of benefit from it. So I'm not sure that just wiping it out [is best], but we have no choice. So we're going to make it work.

I don't think that, generally, kids should live in group homes. But that also means they have to live somewhere.

Where are they living? And we imagine that means every kid that can't go to a group home is going to be placed. And that means recruitment and retention. And we haven't; there's a gap. So here you've got a social worker with a 10-year-old that nobody wants.

And what do you do with them?

I mean, really — we imagine there's a placement for every child. And that's what we're trying to get.

That's why I like Bobby being there. I like Mike Nash [director of the Office of Child Protection] being there. I like our team in the health departments. Because it takes all of them. Public health does all the substance abuse stuff. And a lot of our foster kids, the older kids, they need those kinds of treatments, too.

I'm trying to make everybody understand how important is to work together. And I like what's happening in the county. But we may not get there by the time I'm gone or dead. It's the journey that's important.