



RESEARCH BRIEF

COLLABORATIVE REFORM IN CHILD WELFARE FOR FAMILIES EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE in the Antelope Valley

Background

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) operates one of the largest child welfare systems in the United States. Domestic violence plays a prevalent role in the lives of system-involved families.

In 2020, a collaboration between the UCLA Pritzker Center and stakeholders across Los Angeles County and subsequent report explored the role of domestic violence in the child welfare system.

In 2023, the UCLA Pritzker Center launched a pilot study in partnership with Valley Oasis, a domestic violence service agency, and the DCFS Lancaster Regional Office to respond to recommendations in the earlier report.

The Antelope Valley



Growing population



Large population of children



High child poverty rates



Largest # of foster homes across LA County



Highest # of emergency room visits due to DV



Limited social services

Purpose of the Research



Document the experiences of parent survivors of domestic violence, domestic violence service providers, and child welfare staff.



Develop a collaborative response to these experiences.

Evaluate the interventions implemented.

What We Learned

Survivors of Domestic Violence Struggle Against Numerous Barriers in Child Welfare Cases

1. **Complex Trauma:** Parent survivors of domestic violence often experience trauma, leading to pervasive fear and mistrust.
2. **Isolation in Navigation:** Parent survivors of domestic violence are often expected to navigate their cases and complex systems alone.
3. **Power Dynamics:** Child welfare staff can unintentionally reproduce patterns of power and control.
4. **Lack of Differentiation:** Domestic violence and high-conflict relationships are often treated as the same, leading to inadequate responses to unique situations.
5. **Racial Bias:** Parent survivors from marginalized communities face additional challenges due to racial bias.
6. **Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS):** Child welfare workers and service providers may experience STS, which can impact their ability to provide effective assistance.
7. **Financial Strain:** Economic difficulties can trap parent survivors in cycles of violence and prevent them from leaving abusive relationships.
8. **Housing Shortages:** A lack of shelter and emergency housing options exacerbates the vulnerability of parent survivors and their children.
9. **Limited Resources/Transit:** Services are stretched thin, with long waitlists that delay essential support and secondary prevention opportunities for families in crisis. Sparse bus routes compound the burdens facing parent survivors.
10. **Service Gaps for Children:** A critical need exists for accessible mental health and childcare services to support children affected by domestic violence.

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Collaboration between child welfare staff and domestic violence service providers improves support for parent survivors and their children.

- **Training** resulted in significant knowledge gains about domestic violence
- **Consultation** improves application of domestic violence knowledge and intervention strategies

Recommendation: Additional and Tailored Reform across the Social and Economic Infrastructure of LA County Is Necessary to Support Families Experiencing Domestic Violence

- **Enhance and Scale Collaborative Efforts:** Foster an on-going partnership between DCFS Lancaster and Valley Oasis, and strategically scale similar collaborations throughout LA County to maximize impact.
- **Refine Domestic Violence Referrals:** Implement differentiation protocols for domestic violence cases within the child abuse hotline to ensure more effective and targeted responses.
- **Advance Organizational Culture Change:** Accelerate efforts to transform DCFS's organizational culture, actively addressing and dismantling anti-Black racism in both practice and policy.
- **Strengthen Responses to Secondary Traumatic Stress:** Implement organizational strategies to effectively address secondary traumatic stress across social services.
- **Address Financial Barriers for Survivors:** Develop and execute targeted strategies to eliminate financial obstacles that prevent parent survivors from escaping violent relationships.
- **Enhance Emergency Housing Safety and Increase Capacity:** Assess motel safety and increase emergency housing and shelter capacity to protect parent survivors and their children.
- **Invigorate Domestic Violence Programming:** Enhance domestic violence classes for parent survivors, ensuring accessibility and affordability, particularly for working parents.
- **Expand Mental Health and Childcare Access:** Prioritize mental health services and affordable childcare to support parent survivors and their children.
- **Strengthen Public Transit in Antelope Valley:** Improve public transit options in the Antelope Valley to boost mobility for parent survivors.

The recommendations require collaboration across LA County departments, non-profit service providers, and with domestic violence advocates and parent survivors.