

CONGRATULATIONS

DCFS ALL STARS

DIRECTOR'S EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AWARD WINNERS

January 2012

Outstanding Administrative Manager

Preston Oppenheimer, ARA

Lancaster

Lancaster ARA Preston Oppenheimer takes the Department's goals to heart. He volunteers and participates in many DCFS workgroups and committees that determine how to effectively help and protect children from abuse. He is an active participant in the Eliminating Racial Disparity and Disproportionality (ERDD) program in the Antelope Valley. When ERDD was being launched in the Lancaster office, Mr. Oppenheimer chaired the committee, and hand-picked staff he believed were committed to the project. He personally trained the staff, so they in turn, could recruit and train other staff. Despite his very busy schedule, he always attends ERDD meetings in other offices. Mr. Oppenheimer is the "go to" person in spearheading the new AB12 youth initiative in the Lancaster offices. Since its passage, Mr. Oppenheimer has attended the AB12 convening and liaison committee meetings, has met with regional ILP Coordinators, and instructed staff on what needs to be done to comply with AB12. He is an active participant in the Katie A. project, the QSR, Strategic Management meetings, Data Partnership Co-Design Team, Lead Coaches Workshops, HUB, and many others. After attending his many meetings, Mr. Oppenheimer comes back to the office ready to roll up his sleeves, and implement projects in ways that will improve the lives of the children under DCFS supervision.

Mr. Oppenheimer is an excellent manager who inspires his SCSWs and CSWs to come up with "ideas, remedies, and interventions to build and deliver a better service system. He teaches his staff to be as informative as possible, so that they can identify the critical issues, broaden their ideas of parenting, the role of the State, and individual responsibility. Getting the community, the target population, and his staff involved is the right thing to, and so far, his efforts have resulted in community forums where ideas and strategies on how to eliminate disproportionality and disparity in the Antelope Valley have been exchanged. He works very hard, has an open-door policy, is well-regarded throughout the Department, and never seems to tire of finding ways to improve his managerial style, the quality of life for our children and the means to motivate his staff to do the best for the children and families we serve.

Outstanding Team Staff

The Torrance Facilitation Team

Howard Kunitz, Carlos Torres, Tasgerginnae Tanner, and Mayda Hernandez

Torrance

The Torrance Facilitation Team comprised of Howard Kunitz, Carlos Torres, Tasgerginnae Tanner, and Mayda Hernandez continuously strive to reduce barriers to make a difference in the lives of children. Although the Team's focus is to facilitate Team Decision Making and Resource Management Process Meetings, they have made a greater impact through their creation of different processes to improve outcomes.

The Team has contributed toward reducing detentions; reducing timelines to permanency by improving child safety; and now, through the creation and establishment of the Community Resource Connection (CRC), are enhancing organizational excellence by changing the method in which families are linked to community services. Traditionally, families were tasked to find their own resources to ameliorate the problems which brought them to the attention of the Department. In most cases, having to navigate the different resources available, overwhelmed most parents. The limited available resources and long waiting lists contributed to the parent's frustration and non-compliance due to their failure to enroll and complete court ordered services in the time allowed. The CRC brings community partners (traditional as well as non-traditional) and links families to resources immediately.

Since October 2011, the team has facilitated three CRCs. At each CRC twelve cases are presented, and in each case families were successfully linked to the resources needed. The CRC has been well received by community partners and social workers. All are excited about the connections the families are making as well as the networking between the agencies. Twelve community partners participated in the first CRC in October and the participation has been growing. At the December CRC, thirty community partners attended. Thirty-six families have found connections to services through the last three CRC meetings.

In addition to the CRC meetings, the Team continues to build on the resource guide they started in the beginning of this year. In the past, resources provided to parents were outdated, and at times, no longer a viable resource. The Team updated all resources and posted the listings in Microsoft Office Outlook, which made them more accessible to social workers and easier to update and add information. The social workers have found the resource guide very useful in that all the resources contained are specific to the service area and are updated frequently.

The Torrance Facilitation Team is a champion in building community partnerships. Their excellent networking skills and tireless efforts have enabled them to achieve success in bringing together community partners and the faith-based community to improve outcomes for children and their families.

Outstanding Direct Service Staff

Trish Knechtli, CSW III

Santa Clarita

CSW Trish Knechtli is the first Deaf Native American Indian to work for DCFS. She has made it a priority for all DCFS staff to better understand Native American Indian culture. She helps social workers with ICWA issues, especially notice requirements, and is willing to provide sign language interpretation when needed. Trish regularly dialogues with the ICWA unit to ensure their involvement. As Trish likes to say, “We are all social workers and we are all here for one thing—to ensure we provide services to all.”

A profoundly deaf intern required interpretation that her school was not providing. Without such support her internship and studies would be in jeopardy. When RA Paul Freedland asked Trish to intercede, she readily agreed, advocating for the student and succeeding in providing her sign language interpretation services.

CSW Knechtli is working with the Training Section in creating learning materials for DCFS staff on Deaf culture and how to properly service the Deaf community. When a deaf 13-year-old client was dropped off by the Sheriff’s Department at a DCFS office, no one knew what to do. CSW Knechtli talked to the youth, contacted the child’s social worker, and explained to DCFS staff what was going on. CSW Knechtli was working on a court report at the time, but put it on hold to help the youth.

CSW Knechtli has over thirty years experience representing the disabled community. She has been successful in motivating families to get jobs, stop using drugs and reconnecting them with their families. CSW Knechtli helped a father, who had not worked for many years, get a job and stay employed at the same job. When he was stressed out he would call her; she would go to his job site, listen to his concerns, and reassure him that he could handle it.

She is well regarded by ICWA and the Deaf community. One case initially came to DCFS as an ICWA case, but as it turned out, it was not. CSW Knechtli continued to provide support throughout the life of the case. The maternal grandmother was denied by ASFA, based on her past criminal history, making her unable to adopt. Trish processed a waiver which was denied. She was determined to show that everyone deserves a second chance and got the waiver overturned. The grandmother is now in the final stages of adoption.

On another occasion, CSW Knechtli had three young children she did not want separated. She worked closely with a TA and found a home for all three. If she feels there is a need to ensure the safety of children, CSW Knechtli makes unannounced visits at any time. She attends IEPs and strongly advocates for our children. After attending one IEP, she learned the child was in the wrong school setting and grade. CSW Knechtli worked overtime to get the child in a non-public school which her ILP had initially determined was the best educational choice.

Outstanding Support Service Staff

Bobbie Ewell, Community Worker

Palmdale

Bobbie Ewell is the quintessential example of a hardworking and extremely dedicated DCFS employee, providing support and encouragement for youth in the Antelope Valley area. For the last two years, Bobbie has willingly taken on many extra duties, beyond the scope of her assigned role as a Community Worker, as there was no full-time, on-site ILP Transition Coordinator. Where other staff may have said, "That's not my job," Bobbie stepped up to the plate to assist all ILP eligible youth, always mindful of the difficulties that our youth face in navigating foster care and the dependency court system. While juggling her regular work duties, Bobbie was always available to all transition-age youth (TAY), CSWs, and Community Liaisons. Bobbie helped with referrals for food, housing, MediCal, educational guidance, employment, Independent Living Skills class enrollment and follow-up. With the limited resources in the Antelope Valley area, Bobbie paid special attention to TAY youth facing homeless issues and assisted youth in obtaining school records to facilitate reimbursement for senior expenses. Many of the emancipated youth have developed very positive and trusting relationships with Bobbie and just recently, one young adult, Alicia C. with two minor children, acknowledged Bobbie's dedication and assistance by bringing her a thank you note with a vase of flowers!

Bobbie updates the office on referrals for employment and special events for youth. Bobbie referred 23 youth, the largest number referred in Los Angeles County, for Celebration 2011 for graduating seniors.

With the recent assignment of a new ILP Transition Coordinator, Bobbie has guided the new coordinator and continues to demonstrate passion and devotion in servicing the Transition Age Youth in need. Bobbie's commitment to her role as ILP - Community Worker always exceeds expectations. Bobbie Ewell is a shining star for the Palmdale and Lancaster offices and deserving of the DERA award for Outstanding Support Staff.

**An Outstanding Colleague
Of Yours Could Be the Next Winner.**

NOMINATE Someone NOW!