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County-wide Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project Shows Early Success in Key Areas *Strides Made in Connecting Families with Community Resources, Challenges to Come in Worsening Economy*

As the County-wide Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project (PIDP) picks up steam and shows early success in several key areas, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and community-based providers are facing the unprecedented challenge of assisting families they jointly serve and keeping them safely together in increasingly challenging economic times.

PIDP is a \$5-million child abuse and neglect prevention project begun in 2008 and led by community-based providers selected in each of the County's eight regional Service Planning Areas. The agencies are creating a strength-based network of family support and connecting families to services in order to reduce and prevent child abuse and neglect. Casey Family Programs, a national foundation that works to improve child welfare, is supporting the initiative in three areas: capacity building, strategic communications and evaluation. Additional support for evaluation is provided by First 5 Los Angeles.

Although the rates of children in foster care in Los Angeles County continue to decrease, with an all-time low in January of less than 16,500, concern is mounting that the economic downturn could result in increased stress in families and potential violence.

"This demonstration project is all about engaging families in a positive way, and we believe that doing so has the very real potential to divert them from crisis situations. I'm very encouraged by the groundbreaking strategies being tested," said Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe, an early champion of the project.

"This cutting-edge pilot program offers an innovative and progressive approach to preventing child abuse and neglect," added Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, also an early champion of the project. "We are committed to do things differently - even new and untested things - to improve upon the way we work with and serve our kids and families."

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"To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service"

During the first six months of the PIDP, the project garnered some success which has resulted in cultural changes within DCFS. Rather than limiting or labeling families as being eligible for certain kinds of services based on their relationship with DCFS, there is now a growing belief that any family can benefit from basic services such as employment assistance, job training opportunities, counseling and neighborhood support groups.

“We are taking a proactive approach to the serious situation confronting our agency and our nation,” said DCFS Director Patricia S. Ploehn. “Although the number of children in foster care is dropping as we provide more services to families, ongoing collaboration with community partners and County departments is the only way to keep moving forward on this path toward success. By joining together as a unified force we can realize the value of prevention as a major strategy in the child welfare system.”

There is also a growing focus by DCFS and partnering community agencies on the importance of family economic success and that community-based organizations and groups can be full partners with shared goals, instead of merely “contractors” who do or do not take referrals, all in an effort to ultimately reduce and prevent child abuse and neglect.

As part of the PIDP, graduates from a Vocational Certificate Program in South Los Angeles have already landed jobs in medical billing and fiber optics. In addition, two Family Visitation Centers opened at churches in the South Bay specifically designed to assist families who have had their children removed. The centers provide a home-like and calming environment so that parents can visit with their children in privacy and dignity and receive services to further assist their preparation for the successful and safe return of their children when possible.

Challenges over the next six months will include building a wider network of resources and expanding the involvement and employment of parents and community residents. DCFS and community partners will also face the challenge of sustaining the momentum built by the PIDP when the demonstration project is completed in June 2009. How to sustain the success and momentum will be discussed over the next few months.

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