



STRATEGY BRIEF

# TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

## What is the role of the child protection agency in the **Black Child Legacy Campaign**?

With communities at the helm, the [Black Child Legacy Campaign \(BCLC\)](#), a cross-sector alliance<sup>1</sup> deeply rooted in a shared vision of equity, has been working to reduce the preventable deaths of Black children in Sacramento County by 10% to 20% by 2020. The campaign began in 2015 as a result of data showing that **Black children in Sacramento County were dying at twice the rate of other races** as a result of perinatal and infant sleep-related conditions, third-party homicides, and abuse or neglect. A [steering committee](#) was formed with stakeholders from multiple sectors to identify and implement strategies and key system changes to improve the life expectancy of Black children. For more information about how the BCLC galvanized the community to reduce inequities and facilitate lasting transformation, see the companion brief: *How is the Black Child Legacy Campaign saving children and advancing equity in Sacramento, California?*

At the core of the campaign are the Community Incubator Leads (CILs). Located in each of the seven neighborhoods experiencing the greatest disparities in Black child deaths, CILs operate as community resource hubs providing supports and services to local residents. County staff from public assistance, child protection services, and probation agencies are co-located at the centers so that families can easily access the assistance they need in a coordinated and collaborative way. Each CIL operates differently depending on the specific needs of the community,



casey family programs

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but they all focus on engaging with families early to establish natural relationships and supports so that families know where to go for help if needed. The CILs provide services such as Black birth coaches, violence prevention street outreach, and culturally responsive home visiting programs that build parental protective factors and individual resiliency. At the systems level, members of the steering committee meet, with input from community members, to determine how their individual agencies can better coordinate to support the CILs and identify structural changes within their agencies to reduce inequities.

This community-led movement is making a difference. The outcomes from the first few years show great promise for reducing or eliminating the disparities in Black child deaths. **When comparing 2014 and 2016 data for Black children, there was a 46% reduction in the rate of sleep-related deaths, a 37% reduction in the rate of child abuse or neglect deaths, and a 60% reduction in the rate of third-party homicides for youth under 18.** Recent data from the Sacramento Police Department found that **not a single juvenile was the victim of murder within the city limits in 2019.**

## 21st century child and family well-being system

The BCLC illustrates the promise of a [21st century child and family well-being system](#), one in which the safety and well-being of children is the collective responsibility of an entire community, not just the child protection agency. A 21st century child and family well-being system brings together stakeholders committed to a shared vision of promoting child and family strengths and ensuring that all families can access the supports they need to reach their potential. All sectors of a community must be engaged, including government agencies, community-based organizations, faith institutions, philanthropic organizations, and the business community, along with individual members of the community taking ownership to ensure that all children are physically safe and emotionally nurtured. It

is grounded in a public health approach, which shifts the current response to child safety from intervention after harm to prevention of harm, and supports and serves all families so that every child can not only survive, but thrive.

While child protection agencies have a mandate of responding to allegations of child maltreatment and intervening when appropriate, they are only one part of a larger continuum. In a 21st century child and family well-being system, the majority of investments are dedicated to building natural supports within communities so that families have what they need and do not come to the attention of the child protection agency. Population-based strategies are prioritized in order to have the greatest impact, while involvement in the child protection system is minimized and used as a last resort.

## Practice changes

As part of the BCLC effort, Sacramento County's Department of Child, Family and Adult Services' (DCFAS) Child Protection Services (CPS) implemented practice changes at every level of the child protection continuum. The goals of these changes were not only to prevent child abuse and neglect and safely reduce entries into foster care, but also to increase permanency for those in care. At a population level, the goal of DCFAS and its partnership with the BCLC was to more effectively serve and support Black families and communities, and ultimately reduce child maltreatment and child deaths.

## Investment in primary prevention programs

Data showed that Black families were not participating in and completing prevention services at the same rate as other families involved with the child protection agency. This was due in part to the programs not being offered in the communities where families lived, or by organizations that they trusted. Through the BCLC contracts, Sacramento CPS began to invest in culturally relevant prevention programs embedded in the communities, including home-visiting nurses and birth

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coaches. Any family in the community that expresses a need or interest, not just those involved in the child protection system, can participate.

## Co-location of staff

In a parallel effort to build trust and credibility in the community, DCFAS leadership made a decision to co-locate staff in the CILs, and deliberately chose voluntary informal supervision (IS) caseworkers, rather than emergency response investigation caseworkers. IS caseworkers work with high-risk families that have come to the attention of the child protection agency but their children remain at home as long as there is a safety plan in place and they participate in services. Co-location provided families with an easily accessible, neutral location where they could feel more comfortable meeting with their IS caseworker. In addition, leadership intentionally hired Black special skills staff to mirror the families in the community, laying the foundation for a more positive relationship. Given the unique role of the co-located IS caseworkers, the agency also needed to invest adequate time in selecting and appropriately training these staff in accordance with the BCLC vision, as CPS was fortunate to have existing Black special skills staff apply and transition to these roles.

## Cultural broker program

In collaboration with BCLC, DCFAS also led implementation of a Sacramento County Cultural Broker Program as a complement to the IS caseworkers. Cultural brokers provide advocacy and support to families that are involved with, or at risk of involvement with, the child protection agency and connect them to community resources, provide case advocacy, and offer support with identified case plans and court appearances. Cultural brokers live in the neighborhoods in which they work, and their life experiences and racial backgrounds echo those of the families they are trained to support. The cultural brokers leverage established community relationships to help families successfully navigate child protective services, and they serve as a bridge to mitigate the fraught power dynamic between child protection caseworkers and families.

## MDT prevention services

Each CIL hosts a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) comprised of county human service workers, including child protection staff, probation officers, public assistance and employment workers, and cultural brokers. When families are welcomed into the CIL, they complete a MDT intake assessment, which gathers





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information about what they need, the social services they are currently receiving, the level of urgency of their needs, and who should “come to the table” to support them. MDT members then coordinate with one another to connect families to the right services and supports. In this way, the team wraps supports around a family even before a crisis hits. Each CIL holds weekly team meetings utilizing the [Safety Organized Practice](#) (SOP) engagement approach.

## Impacts

Since the inception of the BCLC in 2015, outcomes have improved across the child protection continuum for all children, with improvements especially noteworthy for Black children. According to DCFAS data:

- The rate of Black children screened in for an investigation or assessment went from 120 in 2014 to 100 per 1000 in 2019, representing a 17% decrease.
- The rate of Black children entering foster care went from 12.7 per 1,000 in 2015 to 9.4 per 1,000 in 2019, a 26% decrease.
- The percentage of Black children in care two+ years at the start of the year who achieved permanency within 12 months increased from 21% in 2015 to 39% in 2018.

## Other benefits

Reduced entry into foster care and increased permanency for children in care are not the only improvements in child protection that have occurred over the past five years. A number of measurable systems-level benefits have also emerged:

**Improved reputation with the community:** The co-location of IS caseworkers and the Cultural Broker Program has bolstered the positive perception of CPS among communities of color in all seven targeted Sacramento neighborhoods. An evaluation of the Cultural Brokers Program found that 95% of those

who worked with a cultural broker felt their view of CPS was more positive as a result. One CIL director shared anecdotally that families were voluntarily seeking out assistance with their open child protection cases, something that never occurred before the BCLC and Cultural Broker Program were established.

**Decreased staff turnover:** In addition to improved relationships among communities of color, IS caseworkers at the CILs have a lower turnover rate than those placed at child protection offices. IS caseworkers have reported increased satisfaction in their work due to their ability to help families identify natural supports, connect them to community resources, and then introduce the family to CIL staff for continued support. They are also able to observe the continued progress of families once the case is closed.

**Changing the public narrative:** One of the goals of the BCLC was to change the way that CPS-involved families are perceived by the public. As such, BCLC launched a multi-media communications campaign to destigmatize families seeking help and advance a narrative that all parents need some support sometimes. In 2017-18, nine media outlets covered 23 different stories about the BCLC, raising community awareness about the disproportionate Black child death rate, spotlighting the array of positive changes happening in the seven communities, and ultimately changing the narrative about families from one of rescue to one of resilience.

## Facilitating factors

DCFAS has been an integral player in the BCLC from the start. Although the agency had already been moving toward an upstream, prevention-focused approach to child protection, the BCLC was the catalyst needed to fundamentally shift the way in which DCFAS operated. Beyond the agency's commitment to the BCLC's mission and goals, DCFAS leadership<sup>2</sup> reported a number of facilitating factors that needed to be in place before the agency could embark on this transformative systems change.

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## Be transparent and accountable

Before becoming involved with the BCLC, the child protection agency in Sacramento County was often perceived as a closed system, both by the families it served and by partner agencies. DCFAS leaders recognized that if they were asking the entire community to partner with the agency to keep children safe from harm, they needed to be more transparent and adaptive. To improve transparency, the agency held a number of community meetings early in the BCLC planning process, sharing data about the disparate trends for Black children within the broader community and soliciting feedback on the greatest needs of families and desired improvements. DCFAS continues to hold these meetings and this continuous feedback loop holds CPS accountable to follow through on promises made to communities and take responsibility when the agency doesn't get it right.

## Fully engage

Another facilitating factor was the willingness of CPS to be fully engaged with the BCLC work. In the early days, the CPS division manager was the sole child protection agency staff member involved with the BCLC. But it soon became apparent that more staff commitment and capacity were needed. As a result, DCFAS shifted a program planner and program specialist to provide day-to-day operational support to the BCLC. In addition, the CPS staff who are co-located at the CILs perceive themselves as fully integrated into the community and part of the staff of the CIL. Families have observed that when they enter a CIL, they can't tell the difference between CIL staff and CPS staff — they just know everyone is there to help.

## Let others lead

A key element to CPS' role in the BCLC has been taking a step back and letting others lead the work. When one member suggested that the CPS division manager be nominated co-chair of the steering committee, she made a strategic and deliberate decision to decline. From her perspective, it was critical that the community not view the BCLC as an initiative

led by the child protection agency, given the historical mistrust of CPS in many communities of color. Having representatives from other organizations co-chair the steering committee emphasized that it is every sector's responsibility to keep children safe from harm, and CPS can't do it alone. CPS also embarked on a culture shift to engage those who have lived experiences with the child protection system, and allow them to lead as well. Those constituent voices were key in informing the BCLC's policy and practice decisions since they offered perspectives unique from everyone else on the steering committee.

## Establish a public-private partnership

A 21st century child and family well-being system requires the commitment and involvement of multiple sectors and members of a community. When envisioning the BCLC, leadership from the various agencies recognized that neither county agencies nor other public agencies could lead this work alone. Leadership reached out to the private and nonprofit sectors to collaborate. One significant component of this collective effort is the partnership with the Sierra Health Foundation, which has brought about levels of flexibility and innovation that would be difficult to achieve through government organizations alone. For example, the Sierra Health Foundation is able to subcontract with smaller community-based organizations trusted within communities that would not meet the requirements to receive county-based grant funding. Other entities, such as faith-based institutions, also have built long-standing credibility and trust with the seven targeted communities, which allows engagement in a much deeper way than if the child protection agency attempted to engage families on its own. Every sector and entity has a critical part to play in this collective approach.

## Serve families holistically

Another facilitating factor was the commitment to take a holistic view of working with families, and having a "do whatever it takes to help families" mindset. It was not enough for DCFAS to meet its mandate of

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investigating allegations of abuse and neglect and deciding whether or not to remove a child from the home; the agency needed to also attend to the greater needs of families and the community conditions that led to the CPS report in the first place. By working with community partners and other agencies, the child protection agency is able to create opportunities to build protective factors and promote resiliency in families.

## Moving forward

The funding for BCLC will expire at the end of 2020, but DCFAS is more determined than ever to continue this innovative and transformative work. Given the current public health crisis and the impact it will have on state and county budgets, it is difficult to know what the future holds. But the data is clear: working collectively toward a common goal is building strong and vibrant communities, promoting wellness and resiliency in families, and making Sacramento a more equitable place to call home.

- 1 The Steering Committee includes representatives from Sacramento County's Departments of Education; Health and Human Services; Child, Family, and Adult Services; Public Health; Probation; Behavioral Health; Human Assistance; and Workforce Development; as well as Sierra Health Foundation, First Five, Child Abuse Prevention Council, faith based institutions, community-based agencies, and youth and parent advocates.
- 2 This brief is based in part on conversations with Kim Pearson, Child Protective Services Division Chief, Sacramento County Department of Child, Family and Adult Services, on February 20, 2020, and Michelle Callejas, Director, Sacramento County Department of Child, Family and Adult Services, on April 23, 2020.

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