

Midcourse Lessons Learned from the Los Angeles County Prevention Initiative Demonstration Program (PIDP): Early Successes, Innovative Partnerships, and the Challenges That Lie Ahead—*Executive Summary*¹

On February 26, 2008 the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved the Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project (PIDP), an innovative countywide effort to demonstrate effective approaches to reducing child abuse and neglect. This unique partnership between the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and community-based organizations is designed to strengthen families while providing opportunities for government agencies and community residents to increase the safety and well-being of children, families and the community. PIDP is a \$5-million, one-year child abuse and neglect prevention project led by community-based providers selected in each of the eight regional Service Planning Areas (SPAs). Guided by the core value of collaboration, DCFS and community organizations are working closely with each other and residents to find the most effective ways to ensure child safety and family well-being. The community organizations are creating strength-based networks of family support that maximize and align resources to connect families and prevent child abuse and neglect.

At the same time, DCFS offices have also been able to use the financial flexibility afforded by the Title IV-E Waiver to help and support families at their “Point of Engagement” with the child protective services system by providing differential responses to individual needs, including linkages to community-based resources, services and supports. Started in 2004, Point of Engagement (POE) has become the Department’s umbrella term for a number of reform strategies including Team Decision Making, Structured Decision Making, Concurrent Planning and others. Since all of these reforms require closer connections between DCFS regional offices and community-based resources for families, DCFS administrators are working hard to enhance relationships with other County departments, cities, school districts, faith-based networks and civic groups to “connect the dots” among those who support and serve families in order to offer just-in-time help, referrals and supports to families.

As DCFS works to integrate many strands of reform into a more effective overall model of child welfare practice, community-based organizations throughout Los Angeles County are developing local networks that provide family-centered services in response to DCFS referrals, as well as engaging a broad range of people in family support activities, relationship-based community organizing projects, and opportunities for economic success. Because DCFS offices are changing their internal practices in parallel with the emergence of these community-based networks, the evaluation team has focused on collecting qualitative and quantitative data on the interactions and synchronicity of PIDP and POE. During 2008, evaluators reviewed documents and analyzed emerging networks, administered on-line surveys on organizational change, and conducted interviews and focus groups with DCFS staff. During the next six months, the evaluation team will also interview participating parents and staff from community-based organizations.

Although the PIDP partnerships are only about six months old—having launched in the summer of 2008—there is a palpable sense of enthusiasm and excitement among participants. This mid-course report was designed to illustrate some of the changes that are underway from the perspectives of those who are most involved. It draws on information from a number of sources to describe a very complex set of reform efforts and prevention activities designed to address the unique needs and resources of the different regions of Los Angeles County.

Most of the “lessons learned” are drawn directly from the comments of over 150 people who attended a PIDP learning session on November 17, 2008. The design for the day included afternoon breakout groups where representatives from eight different SPAs were asked to discuss, compare and contrast their experiences to date in implementing new concepts around preventing child abuse and neglect. The full report is based on transcriptions of detailed group discussions guided by four key questions: (1) What are your early successes?; (2) What have you learned about the best ways of communicating child maltreatment prevention concepts to others that you are working with in your community?; (3) What have you learned about how DCFS offices can best partner with existing community-based networks?; and (4) What are the major challenges for the next 6 months for the initiative and how do you plan to address them? Highlights of answers for each question follow.

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Early Successes

- 1. Including multiple levels of child maltreatment prevention and outreach is very important.** One of the early successes of the PIDP relates to the three different levels of prevention —primary, secondary, and tertiary— that are being integrated into each region's practices.
- 2. Effective strategies to improve the economic status of families are even more important now, and some PIDP agencies are learning how to help families improve their own finances.** Some of the community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide counseling, therapy or other service-oriented interventions are realizing that they need to heighten their focus on family economic success and are now beginning to do so.
- 3. More services and supports are being offered where families live, so there are opportunities for families to get involved in neighborhood-based conversations, to get to know and support each other, and to spread the word about helpful services.**
- 4. New partnerships are being formed with agency staff and community members deepening their relationships.** Some SPA networks are doing new and exciting work with different populations, such as parents of incarcerated youth, pregnant and parenting teens, parents in substance abuse recovery programs. Many are using relationship-based community organizing strategies instead of or in addition to traditional service delivery approaches.
- 5. DCFS staff are seeing that community based organizations, faith-based groups and other local entities can be full partners with shared goals, not just “contractors” who do or do not take “referrals.”**

Communicating Prevention Concepts

- 1. Mutual respect and personal relationships are essential prerequisites for effective work.** Personal relationships among staff members in different agencies, among community residents, and among community members and the professionals who seek to serve them are critically important building blocks in this prevention work.
- 2. Having clear concepts about prevention is the first step toward effective communication.**
- 3. Being strengths-oriented requires a shift in thinking.** An orientation that focuses on strengths, while realistically assessing problems or needs, does change the way that professionals talk to each other, and the way they work with families.

Partnerships Between DCFS and Community-based Networks

- 1. Broadening definitions and rethinking assumptions is key.**
- 2. More DCFS office leaders and staff are realizing that they need community residents and community-based agencies as core partners in keeping children safe.** The PIDP has helped to accelerate culture change inside many of the DCFS offices. DCFS staff members are thinking in terms of community more frequently rather than just focusing on individual families as they reach out to better understand the neighborhoods they serve, and as they develop new intervention strategies.
- 3. School-based strategies are very important as they help connect DCFS and its partners with families before problems become acute.** Some DCFS offices have had difficulty implementing effective school-based services, but others have been quite successful. They are learning from each other.
- 4. Changing relationships among established players is challenging, but shared goals help people realize that together they can create more resources for families.**

Major Challenges for the Next Six Months

- 1. Expand agency/parent/community resident shared leadership (partnering) and employment opportunities.**
- 2. Continue to develop relationships, build on resources that are already in place, and enhance existing infrastructure and capacity.**
- 2. DCFS and PIDP network agencies need to think about and plan for sustainability now.**
- 3. Consider using some of the savings from the POE/Title IV-E Waiver reforms such as flexible funding investment, to continue some of the most effective community-based PIDP activities and local initiatives.**