L.A.'s Plan to Tackle the 6-Million Hour Gorilla: Foster Care Visitations

Los Angeles County's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) issued a report last week estimating that the department spends two million staff hours facilitating another four million hours of "visitation" every year.

When a child is removed from the custody of his or her parent due to abuse and neglect, a key part of the reunification process is ensuring that child can visit with his or her parent.

"If the ultimate goal is to have children live with their parents or live with their family, they have to see each other and build trust and love," said Brandon Nichols, DCFS' acting director.

Many of these visits are monitored, providing the courts with critical information that helps judicial officers decide whether or not a child can be safely returned home.

But in a county like Los Angeles, where the 10,000 children receiving reunification services are shuttled across tens of thousands of miles of road, visitation is a logistical nightmare. Reunification takes an average of 10.2 months in L.A. County, almost twice as long as the national average of 5.2 months.

In recognition of both the critical importance and the crippling immensity of administering these visits, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors issued a motion in September of last year directing DCFS to come up with a plan to help speed up the reunification process. Half a year later, the department delivered.

The goal, according to the report, is what the department is calling "visitation coaching."

"Visitation Coaching will allow an opportunity to honor the pre-existing bond, and minimize the impact of removal while at the same time develop parent capacity specifically in the areas that led to removal," the report reads.

To get there, the department is asking the [Board of Supervisors for at least $1.5](#) million to hire 18 new administrators to serve as "air traffic-controllers" coordinating visits. It also outlines a pilot that relies on a church in Pasadena, and is hopeful that a "foster care hackathon" in April will help speed the application of technological solutions.

The report also stresses the importance of the county's 243 human service aides (HSAs) who spend 75 percent of their time monitoring and driving to and from visits. Another 86 HSA positions "are in the process of being filled."

But given the immensity of the visitation challenge, these aides are not nearly enough to handle it all. The department also reimburses foster parents and other caregivers to transport children to visits, which often take place in one of the county's 18 regional offices.

Until February of this year Shari Walker* worked as one of those aides. Walker said that the work was non-stop, and that it was commonplace to cut back on the amount of visitation that the courts ordered.

"It was very difficult especially for the children [who were close to their parents, not](#) being able to give them as many hours as they would like because there was another visit [for another child] right after," Walker said. "I wish there was more time."

While HSAs are some of the lowest paid employees in the department, with base salaries of a little less than $36,000 a year, Walker said that they have an outsized role in some of the most traumatic moments of a child's life.

She remembers spending a long day and night with a 6-year-old girl and her baby sister. The day started at around 10:00 a.m. when the siblings were removed and did not end until 1:00 a.m. the next day when Walker dropped the children off at a foster home in a neighboring county.

It took her 20 minutes to calm the older girl down, who clung to her.

"What's important about this story," Walker said, "is that five months later the little girl remembered me and gave me a hug."

To help free up more of the aides' time, the DCFS plan requests funds to hire 18 new children's services administrators. These administrators are intended to be the point person for each office, scheduling transportation for children, parents and caregivers; working with the

faith-based community and foster family agencies; and helping to develop [visitation centers Seattle](.).

"This sort of meaningful and purposeful visitation planning will ideally result in positive visitation and reunification outcomes," the report reads.

Data provided in the report show that 36 percent of children removed from April to June 2015 reunified with their parents within 12 months, a few points shy of the national standard.

In addition, Nichols of DCFS says that the department needs to get better about where it places children.

"The closer kids are to the home of origin, the closer they are to family, the more these issues take care of themselves," he said. "The farther out they get, the more it compounds. The less time kids spend on freeways and the more time they spend getting to be kids with their families, outcomes will improve."

The department's plan also includes a pilot program with the Foster Care Project at All Saints Church in Pasadena. In 2013, the church launched its Family Connect program, which relies on volunteers to monitor visits at safe, child-friendly [visitation centers](.).

In its report, the department is requesting 90 days to sketch out exactly how an expanded partnership with All Saints would work.

In the September board motion that got the ball rolling, then-Supervisor Mike Antonovich and current Supervisor Sheila Kuehl directed DCFS to look into whether ride-sharing companies like Uber or Lyft could be used to ease the transportation burden that comes with visitation. A county in Washington State, for example, piloted a program with Uber Business that showed early success in ensuring that parents made it to their visits.

While DCFS' plan doesn't provide much detail on this count, it does reference the importance of technology in the process.

"In search of Technology Solutions, DCFS is participating in #HackFosterCareLA**, a two-day event that will take place this Spring," the report reads.

One of the challenge statements for that event – which will bring together software programmers, foster youth and child welfare professionals – is focused on how to improve foster care visitation.