

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Department of Children and Family Services Policy and Practices During COVID-19;

A Program Evaluation

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Social Work

By

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in collaboration with

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May 2021

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## Dedication

This is dedicated to my daughter, Ariana Aaliyah Loudermill. Every day you motivate me to show up and be the best version of myself that I can be. If it were not for your presence in my life, I am unsure if I would have taken the leap to apply for graduate school. Ariana, you are loving, brave, and smart. It is truly a blessing to be your Mommy. I love you, forever!

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## Abstract

Department of Children and Family Services Policy and Practices during COVID-19

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By

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Master of Social Work

Purpose: The purpose of this project was to evaluate and describe the Department of Child and Family Services' (DCFS) changes in policies and practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective was to understand the impact that the policies and procedures resulting from the virus had on the child welfare system, specifically DCFS. COVID-19 is expected to cause physical, mental, and financial stress therefore, we expect an increase in child abuse incidents, however the actual number of reported referrals was 27% lower than expected for March and April 2020. The results have found that DCFS policies have decreased in-person contact with clients. Further research may give insight as to the consequences of these procedure changes.

Keywords: DCFS, COVID-19, Policies, Los Angeles County, Referrals, Child Welfare

## **Introduction**

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) describes their focus on the safety, wellbeing, and permanency of the children who reside within Los Angeles County (DCFS, n.d.-g). Per the DCFS website, the department's main mission is to ensure that the two million children who live within Los Angeles County are safe, and that they are able to respond to any child at risk of abuse or neglect (DCFS, n.d.-a). They collaborate with several community-based organizations in an attempt to provide families with the tools and resources needed to promote child safety and meet their needs. Finally, DCFS strives to ensure that all children grow up in a stable and loving home. Even when this cannot be achieved, by returning a child to their home, DCFS works to connect them with families who can still promote growth and the ability for them to thrive.

### ***History & Mission of Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services***

Los Angeles County DCFS originates from the Office of Superintendent of Children's and Women's Work, founded in 1891. Their mission was to care for impoverished women and their children under the guidelines of the 1851 Poor Law. The first Juvenile Court in California was established in 1903. Following this, in 1913, DCFS was established under the Department of Charities (DCFS, n.d.-b). Child Protective Services (CPS), is operated at the state-level in the United States. Their primary objectives are to respond to child abuse and neglect referrals. Child Protective Service workers are responsible for responding to over 2.5 million reports of child maltreatment that occur annually in the United States. Individuals who suspect child maltreatment are advised to report the maltreatment to DCFS as soon as possible. Outside of regular reporters of child abuse, there are several professions in which employees are mandated reporters. The California Department of Education defines a mandated reporter as a person who

is required by law to report all suspected and known cases of child abuse or neglect. They must report it to the local law enforcement or a county child welfare agency. Mandated Reporting laws began in the United States in the 1960s. It became a requirement for the states that would be receiving money from the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) (Safe Start Center, 2011, n.p). These laws were created in an effort to promote reporting to CPS, which would help “protect vulnerable children from abuse and/or unhealthy living situations in their state. Because of this, many states decided to mandate specific groups of professionals to report who they felt would be the best equipped to identify abused and neglected children” (Safe Start Center, 2011, n.p).

### ***DCFS Investigations***

According to the DCFS policy, investigations are conducted when a referral is made to the Child Protection Hotline (DCFS, n.d.-c). DCFS then determines if the report meets requirements in order to be investigated under the law. If the referral does prompt an investigation, one will begin to conduct and ensure the safety, well-being, and permanency of the child/ren. Some of these investigations are done in conjunction with local law enforcement agencies, however not all investigations require the accompaniment of law enforcement. According to the County of Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services, Child Welfare Services Data Fact Sheet, there were 80,183 referrals in 2019. Of these referrals, 154,018 were within LA county and 1.1 % of LA county referrals were due to caretaker absence or incapacity. 1% of referrals were due to severe neglect, 21.7% were due to sibling abuse, 16.9% were due to emotional abuse, 31.7% were due to general neglect, 9.8% were due to sexual abuse, 17.6 % were due to physical abuse, and 0.1% were due to exploitation. (DCFS, 2019, n.p).

## ***COVID-19 & The Effects on the Department of Children & Family Services***

DCFS has had steady numbers of incoming referrals in need of investigation over the last few years. However, in March 2020 numbers began to decline. In February 2020, the total number of referrals in Los Angeles County DCFS was 13,194, but numbers drastically declined as the Coronavirus pandemic exploded. In April 2020, only 7,127 referrals were reported to DCFS. (DCFS, 2020-a,n.p). According to the Center for Disease Control, “Coronavirus (COVID-19) is an illness caused by a virus that can spread from person to person, this is a new coronavirus that has spread throughout the world, symptoms can range from mild (or no symptoms) to severe illness” (CDC, 2020, n.p). As a response to the pandemic,

“DCFS is currently following its Emergency Operations Plan at level red. This indicates an increased need for resources and allows the department to respond to this crisis while maintaining minimum operations. Under the Emergency Operations Plan, DCFS is temporarily postponing in person meetings, trainings, gatherings, and special events to the extent possible” (DCFS,2020-b, Pp1).

Mid-March 2020, LA County began ordering closures, in order to stop or slow the spread of COVID-19. School closures also began in March 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Teachers and school staff account for the number one source of child abuse allegations. So far, many states have seen a decline in reports for child maltreatment allegations, which was largely determined by school closures. COVID-19 is expected to cause physical, mental, and financial stress therefore, we expect an increase in child abuse incidents, however the actual number of reported allegations was 27% lower than expected for March and April 2020 (Baron, Goldstein & Wallace, 2020, Pp.1).



Due to COVID-19, there has been an increased risk for child maltreatment, that has been escalated by financial, physical, and mental stress associated with pandemic closures resulting in unanticipated employment loss amongst other stressors (Lawson, Piel, & Simon, 2020). With a global pandemic, and many other stressors it can be assumed that child maltreatment may be at an all-time high, however there is limited physical access to children during this crisis. Many children in LA County are being home schooled due to school closures which can prevent teacher and school personnel from identifying and reporting signs of child abuse as necessary. “Articles on COVID-19 and CPS reports raise the possibility that the declines might be due to school closures. Reports from educational personnel accounted for 20.5% of all reports in 2018 (DHHS, 2020)” (Johnson-Reid et al., 2020, n.p.).

### **History of COVID**

“The history of human coronaviruses began in 1965 when Tyrrell and Bynoe found that they could passage a virus named B814. It was found in human embryonic tracheal organ cultures obtained from the respiratory tract of an adult with a common cold” (Kahn, 2005). In 2019, emergence of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), first identified in Wuhan, China created a global pandemic (CDC, n.d).

“COVID-19 is a contagious virus that is part of a large family of coronaviruses that causes disease of varying severities, ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. COVID-19 is also called a novel coronavirus because it is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified to humans” (First 5 LA org, 2020, Pp.1).

### **Population Impacted**

DCFS is the largest child protection services agency. In Los Angeles County alone, they are responsible for more than 2 million children across 88 cities. They are governed by a 5-member Board of Supervisors (DCFS, n.d.-b). Due to COVID-19 closures, the United States is seeing the highest rate of unemployment since 1948 (Lawson, Piel, & Simon, 2020). With school closures and high unemployment rates, families are under huge amounts of stress, which leads to an increase in risk factors for child maltreatment. However, due to COVID-19, DCFS referrals have been on the decline. Based on the LA County Fact Sheet (DCFS, 2020-a), when comparing the reporting month of January 2020 versus the reporting month of April 2020, there is a difference of over 5000 referrals. In January 2020, there were 12,223 child referrals, but in April 2020, numbers plummeted to 7,127.

### **Community/Contextual Factors**

The rise of COVID-19 has led to a significant increase in stressors for virtually all families. Financial, mental, and physical stresses are risk factors for child maltreatment. Many families face unemployment and therefore are at a higher risk for housing insecurity. Housing hardship disproportionately affects low-income families, who may lack affordable and adequate housing. Poverty may consequently undermine healthy family functioning. Housing insecurity, particularly, in conjunction with other forms of material hardship, may increase the likelihood that a parent will neglect or abuse their children. Several studies have documented the high prevalence of housing insecurity among families involved with CPS (Warren & Font, 2015). Consequently, the effects of child maltreatment can lead to more serious health issues. “Child maltreatment is a significant public health concern associated with impairments in psychological, behavioral, and physiological functioning across the lifespan” (Lawson, Piel, & Simon, 2020, Pp.2).

## **DCFS Response to COVID-19**

“DCFS leadership is working closely with the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and health officials to address Novel Coronavirus, or COVID-19 concerns. DCFS is working to ensure the safety of our staff and the families we serve through a variety of measures and will continue in its child protection work and provide essential services to children and families” (DCFS, 2020-b, Pp.1)

As of March 16, 2020 DCFS, has closed their offices to the public and have allowed employees to work from home. Recently, they have implemented a pre-screening process to protect families and employees from exposure. Additionally, CSW staff going into the field as well as in DCFS offices are now required to wear masks in the field to limit exposure and prevent the spread of the virus. In some continuing services cases, videoconferencing is accepted as a viable substitute for in-person visits (DCFS, 2020-b, Pp.1-2).

### **Aims & Objectives**

Currently, there is no available literature on interventions to disruptions in daily functioning and family dynamics brought on by COVID-19 such as childcare and home schooling for parents and caregivers. There may be a need for effective interventions for children coping with the ramifications of COVID-19 to address mental health concerns over the phone or internet. We do not yet know if online interventions are capable of being as beneficial as in-person visits to verify the welfare of children as well as mental health concerns. As we have never experienced a pandemic before, we do not know if DCFS will be able to manage all needs of the families that come in contact with the Department, while they are currently operating with gaps in services.

## **Method**

This project used the logic model to evaluate the Los Angeles County DCFS child abuse reporting policies and practices that have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

### **Situation**

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the LA County DCFS has seen a decrease in the number of reported referrals despite increased risk factors for financial and emotional stress for families.

### **Inputs**

To determine program resources, online public records and information was utilized. Los Angeles County DCFS has twenty regional offices with over 9,000 staff members. The annual budget for LA county child protective services was generated from the LA county website (County of LA, 2020). The DCFS budget was generated from the Los Angeles County Development Authority Annual Budget for the 2020-2021 fiscal year. Los Angeles County DCFS has access to hundreds of community partner agencies and large public agencies listed on their website under parent resources (DCFS, n.d.-d). Additionally, the Child Welfare Policy Manual on the DCFS website was used to gather information regarding intakes and procedures (n.d.-e).

### **Outputs**

LA DCFS program activities are outlined in Appendix B, using stated guidelines from the DCFS website which establishes the methods for intake and expected procedures for case investigation and follow-ups. Specific activities are outlined in the LA County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection (LA County Government, 2014) and the report, The Road to Safety for Our Children (County of LA, 2014).

**Outcomes**

Expected outcomes of the program are described in the Title IV-E Waiver (DCFS, n.d.-f).

Outcomes are the result of findings from LA DCFS previous years outputs and activities.

**Context**

LA County DCFS Data Fact sheets provide data on child abuse, description of the agency, and describe the context for this programs (DCFS, 2020-a). DCFS Caseload Statistics provide demographic data including ages, locations, ethnicities, and gender of children and families with DCFS cases (County of Los Angeles, 2019).

## Results

### Temporary Policy Changes to Child Welfare Policy Manual due to COVID-19

DCFS policies are set to create expectations, maintain consistency and overall to provide guidelines for employees. These policies also help to ensure that people who work for organizations are treated equally and fairly. DCFS has several policies in place in order to guide and assist staff in developing plans so that they are able to safely manage the cases that they are assigned. They are implementing temporary policy changes by sending out email blasts to their staff. Due to there being no previous policy for COVID-19, these policies were put in place to address the current pandemic and do not have a prior policy to change. Evangeline Stitt sent out an email blast on Monday, June 22, 2020 at 4:47 PM regarding COVID-19 and the Resuming In Person Visits, the email stated:

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the Department has been implementing temporary changes to specific policies in order to assist staff in developing a plan to safely manage cases. The State has issued updated guidance with regard to in-person visits via All County Letter (ACL) 20-70. Per ACL 20-70, all county child welfare agencies and juvenile probation departments are to resume in-person requirements related to caseworker visits for children, wards, and nonminor dependents that were in place prior to the COVID-19 declaration of a state emergency (i.e., per current policy practice as reflected in the Child Welfare Policy Manual on LA Kids). The temporary measures for monthly caseworker visits established via ACL 20-25 are effective through the end of business June 30, 2020. Effective July 1, 2020, all existing statutory, regulated, and written guidance requirements relative to all monthly caseworker visits that were modified by ACL-2025 are reinstated and all relevant required activities are to resume, except as specified below.

These exceptions are effective through August 14, 2020, or sooner if determined by the Department.” (Personal Communication, June 22, 2020)

With the ongoing health crisis raging on, the temporary policies in regard to COVID-19 that were put in place were extended on July 9, 2020. The information was sent out via email blast by Evangeline Stitt at 8:04 AM. The email states:

Due to the COVID-19 declaration of State of Emergency, the State has been issuing guidance via All County Letters (ACLs) and All County Information Notices (ACINs) to assist the Department with the implementation of the temporary measures during the COVID-19 public health crisis. In response to the State’s direction, the Department has been issuing memos to assist staff in use of these temporary measures for developing plans to safely manage cases and respond to referrals. Because these are only temporary changes, no alterations have been made to the language of the policies in our Child Welfare Policy Manual. Instead, we are informing you of the temporary policy changes, through this email blast. Several of the State’s temporary measures were due to expire on June 30, 2020; however, due to the continued public health crisis, the State has extended the Department’s use of temporary policy changes via ACLs 20-73. ACL 20-73 extends guidance for the documentation of caseworker visits by alternative means of contact CWS/CMS, when alternative means of contact is allowed. The temporary policy changes are extended beyond June 30, for the duration of the state of emergency, except where otherwise noted. The extensions of the temporary policy changes are, as follows: (1) ACL 20-25 “Providing Optimal Child Welfare and Probation Services to Children and Families During Coronavirus (COVID-19) California State of Emergency” (2) ACL 20-70: “Resuming In-Person Caseworker Visitation Requirements for Dependent Children

and Wards”. Staff are reminded that an LA Kids COVID-19 Temporary Policy Change memo dated June 22, 2020\* addressing ACL 20-70 supersedes ACL 20-25. The memo addressed the State’s direction for the Department to resume in-person contacts except under specific circumstances. If it is determined that an alternative method of contact is needed, the State has authorized continued use of the instructions in ACL 20-25. The exceptions for in person contacts are effective through August 14, 2020. Alternative means of contact is only allowed in three (3) exceptional situations: (1)The state, county, or other local public health department in the jurisdiction in which the child resides, as applicable, provides direction and/or shifts back to Stage 1. (2)The family or caregiver refuses entry due to their own health and safety concerns related to the risk of COVID-19 infection. In this case, the caseworker, in consultation with their supervisor, is to identify additional means for accomplishing the visit, such as conducting visits outdoors with appropriate physical distancing or utilizing videoconferencing. (3)The family, caregiver, child or someone else in the household has been exposed to, is experiencing symptoms of, or had tested positive for, COVID-19.” (Personal Communication, July 9, 2020)

### **In-Person Activities & PPE**

Due to public health concerns, DCFS implemented temporary policies for preparing and conducting In-Person Visits and Interviews for staff. The emails provided guidelines for staff to follow when they are completing visits. This policy was shared via email blast by Evangeline Stitt on Monday, June 22, 2020 at 4:47 PM. The email stated:

#### Preparing for In-Person Visits and Interviews

When initiating face-to-face contact with a family, be mindful of public health concerns by informing the client that, in order to protect public health and provide appropriate



services to that individual and family, to please answer “yes” or “no” to the following: (1) Has anyone in your home tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 14 days? (2) Have you, your children, and/or anyone in your household had close contact with a person who tested positive for COVID-19 with a lab-confirmed test in the past 14 days? (3) In the past 14 days, have you, your children, and/or anyone in your household had a cough or shortness of breath/difficulty breathing, or at least two (2) of any of the following symptoms: Fever, Headache, Sore Throat, Muscle Pain, Repeated shaking with chills, New Loss of taste or smell, Cough, Shortness of breath. If someone answers “yes” to any of the above, this is indicative of potential COVID-19 symptoms and/or exposure based upon current public health guidance. Encourage them to contact their doctor and let them know about the symptoms and/or exposure. Staff should follow public health guidance, including the use of Prevention and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) guidelines as appropriate, when conducting necessary meetings with someone whose symptoms are indicative of COVID-19. Additionally, prior to initiating a face-to-face contact, the following questions should be asked of the applicant: (1) Are you or anyone in your household leaving home to go to work? Yes/No, and list professions. (2) Other than residents of your home, have you been in a gathering in your home or outside of your home of more than 5 people in the last 14 days? Yes/No. Again, for all face-to-face contact, use Prevention and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) guidelines established by Public Health. Additional information related to preventative recommendations can be found on the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) website.

### **Conducting In-Person Visits and Interviews**

Prior to face-to-face contact, review the preparation guidelines above. When conducting in-person communication, recommended actions include: (1) Ensure a private space to allow for the discussion of sensitive and/or confidential information. Consider conducting as much of the visit as possible outdoors, if feasible and while maintaining confidentiality. (2) Ensure that meeting places are large enough to allow for at least six feet of distance between all individuals. (3) When available, use hand sanitizer or antibacterial wipes and wipe down anything before and immediately after they are brought into a home or meeting area, such as chairs, table surfaces, and writing instruments. Avoid bringing unnecessary items into the meeting area. (4) Avoid touching surfaces in the residence as much as possible. Use a tissue or other appropriate hand coverages to touch surfaces when needed. (5) Avoid shaking hands or engaging in other forms of physical greetings. (6) Clean and sanitize hands with soap and warm water, or hand sanitizer, or sanitizing wipes after each home visit. Also, wipe down anything that was brought into the home immediately upon leaving the residence. (7) Ensure extra pens or other supplies are on hand for the family's use so that these items do not need to be returned. (8) When meeting in the home of the birth parent(s) or petitioner(s), inquire about removing their shoes before entering the home. (9) After each home visit, remove and wash clothing as soon as possible (Personal Communication, June 22, 2020).

### **Referrals & Response Times**

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the policies that were put in place to address the response times for referrals were based on the referral type. According to the DCFS Child Welfare Policy Manual, section 0050-503.15, Response Time Referrals, there are three different types of response referrals: Expedited Response Referrals, Immediate Response Referrals, and

Five-Day Response Referrals. Expedited Response Referrals require an immediate in person response, but no longer than two hours after the referral has been received. The manual states that an Expedited Response Referral is generated when: (a) Law Enforcement has taken temporary custody of a child, (b) If Law Enforcement arrest parents, and there is no caregiver for the child, (c) DCFS and Law Enforcement are completing a joint assessment of child abuse, (d) Law Enforcement is at the scene and calls DCFS to complete a safety assessment, (e) when there is concern that a child will be unavailable after they have disclosed abuse or neglect, and that child is at school, hospital, or another agency, (f) if a child can be exposed to more abuse or neglect prior to an investigation begin completed (DCFS, n.d.-e, 0050-503.15).

An immediate response referral is generated when: (a) the child can is or likely to be in imminent danger such as injury, disability, physical pain, emotional harm that can be seen as severe, and/or death, (b) if law enforcement makes the referral and states that the child is in imminent danger of experiencing abuse, neglect, or exploitation. (c) if an CPH CSW determines that the child referred by the law enforcement agency is at immediate risk for abuse, neglect or exploitation. Immediate Response Referrals require an in-person response to be completed prior to the end of the CSWs shift, on the day that they received the referral. A Five-Day Response Referral requires an in person response to be completed within five business days, or by the date that is specified on the referral. A referral is usually assigned as a five day, when there is no threat of imminent danger to the child. Five Days are assigned when CPH CSW have decided that an immediate response is not appropriate, but a response still needs to be made; and when Law Enforcement states that the child is not an immediate risk for neglect, abuse, or exploitation. (DCFS, n.d.-e, 0050-503.15)

According to an email blast that was sent out on Tuesday, August 25, 2020 at 7:11 PM by Evangeline Stitt, there was an extension given to 5 Day in person response times:

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the Department implemented temporary changes for specific policies in order to assist staff in developing plans to safely manage cases.

Because there are only temporary changes, no alterations have been made to the language of the policies in our Child Welfare Policy Manual. Instead, we are informing you of the temporary policy changes through this email blast. Background: On Thursday, March 19, 2020, the Departments issued a temporary policy change regarding 5-day response times for emergency response in-person investigations. Specifically, the following temporary policy change was implemented. For five (5) day response referrals, temporary guidelines extended the time frame for responding to all five day response referrals to ten calendar days. The entire 10 calendar day period need not be used, and, as appropriate, response times may be designated as “10 day by” an earlier date. (This is analogous to our regular practice of designating some response times as “5 day by” an earlier date.)” (Personal Communication, June 22, 2020)

### **Visitation**

According to the initial DCFS policy for Family Visitation, under the following circumstances families would need to have a family visitation plan (FVPs) in place. The circumstances are (1) after a child has been removed from home, a visit needs to be scheduled within 72 hours (2) prior to every court hearing so that the CSW can provide the court with an FVP recommendation, and (3) after each hearing to implement the new plan that the court ordered. The policy states that family visits should occur weekly. Visits should also be scheduled for birthday, holidays, and all other important events or occasions. No exceptions can be made to

visitation requirements without a court order. (DCFS, 2019) On April 10, 2020 at 10:46 AM, a temporary policy change was implemented for visitation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The email was sent out as an email blast by Evangeline Stitt, the email stated:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department is implementing temporary changes to specific policies in order to assist staff in developing plan to safely manage cases. The below temporary policy changes are effective beginning Monday, April 6, 2020, until 90 days after the Governor of California declares that the State of emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic is lifted, or until the emergency rules issued are amended or repealed. Because these are only temporary changes no alterations have been made to the language of the policies in our child welfare policy manual. Instead, we are informing you of the temporary policy changes, through this email blast. The purpose of this memo is to provide the following information: (1)an explanation of the new, emergency rules issued by the judicial council, effective April 6, 2020, regarding court ordered Visitation during the current state of emergency related to COVID-19. A summary of the rules is below. (2) Inform staff that the judicial council rules addressed in this memo supersede the standing court orders addressed in the COVID-19 memo issue to staff on March 23rd, 2020. The standing court orders which were to be in effect from March 20th through April 16th, 2020 had been vacated effective immediately. Manner of Visitation: During this state of emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic, all previously authorized Visitation must continue , however, CSWs are to determine the manner of Visitation to ensure that the needs of the family are met. The manner of visitation is how the visits will take place such as: In person visits, Electronic means, including: FaceTime, Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, etc. Telephonic Visitation Decisions about

the manner in which Visitation is to occur shall be considered on a case by case basis, as follows: (1) Balance the public health directives and best interests of the child. (2) Take into consideration whether in person visitation may continue to be held safely. Family time is important for child and parent well-being, as well as for efforts towards reunification. Family time is especially important during times of crises. Required Notice for a Change in the Manner of Visitation: As described below, if the CSW changes the manner of visitation under this temporary policy, notice to the attorney for the child and parent/legal Guardian will be required in certain circumstances. Notice is required when the manner of visitation is modified for: (1) A child and a parent/legal guardian in reunification (2) A child who is having sibling visitation (3) A child and a parent/legal Guardian who has a hearing pending under WIC Section 366.26. Notice shall be given within five court days of the change. Notification via email if at all possible, to ensure a record of the notification. If notice to counsel occurs telephonically, the CSW shall document the phone call in the contact notes and send an email to counsel to memorialize that notice was given telephonically. Court Review Process: The attorney for the child or parent/legal Guardian may ask the juvenile court to review the change in manner of visitation. The child or parent/legal Guardian has the burden of showing that the change is not in the best interest of the child or is not based on current public health directives. The request must be made within 14 court days of the change. Suspension of Visitation: Visitation may only be suspended if a detriment finding is made by a court in a particular case based on the facts unique to that case. A suspension of visitation means no visit in any form: in person, electronic, remote, telephonic, or any other manner of visitation. A detriment finding must not be based solely on the existence of the impact of the state of

emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic or related public health directives. Staff are advised that this is not a change to policy or law, and the suspension of visit is not the same as changing the manner of visitation. A suspension of visitation will still be a last resort when the visitation is detrimental to the child. A WIC 388 motion is required to suspend visitation, please refer to DCFS policy “WIC 388 Petitions: Response Reports” (0300-503.41) for further direction. Consult with DCFS management in County Counsel if the safety of the child requires an immediate suspension of Visitation prior to a WIC 388 hearing being granted. Extending overnight visits: If there is a current court order for overnight visits, or an order giving DCFS discretion to liberalize to overnight visits, CSWS may consider allowing an extended visit taking into account the above guidance.

## **Discussion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has consequences far beyond the detriment to physical health. We have seen the virus impact the ways in which the population lives and more importantly, we have taken note of increased stress levels with the loss of employment, housing, loved ones and any sense of normalcy. The emotional challenges of these hardships consequently increase the risk of child maltreatment. There is major concern that despite the known relationship between high stress levels and increased risk for abuse, the numbers of DCFS referrals have declined significantly since the emergence of COVID-19.

DCFS has implemented several policy changes in attempt to protect the organization's employees as well as the children and families they serve from the impacts of the virus, however these protective measures may have disastrous consequences for children and families. These policy changes have decreased in-person client contact and have discouraged CSWs from entering clients' homes unless deemed necessary, creating a gap in care and services as CSWs do not know what they do not see. Children's in-person contact with mandated reporters has been significantly reduced due to safety measures put into place by the local government. This, coupled with the increased stress factors resulting from the pandemic makes it even more disturbing to find such a significant decrease in the number of referrals coming into DCFS. The lack of referrals at a high-stress time indicates that electronic communications may not be an adequate method for ensuring the safety and support of children and their families. Despite the obstacles that the virus has presented, and the impact of the measures set in place as a result, DCFS workers have continued to make regular in-person contact with families and children. For this reason, many children and families have continued to receive services through DCFS, and child maltreatment was likely prevented in many cases.



## **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that it was not conducted as a random control trial, but rather it utilized pre-existing records and information as a program evaluation study. Therefore, we cannot identify any causal relationships in this study. Another limitation to this study is the lack of available information on COVID-19 due to the recency of its emergence. Lastly, there is limited information on DCFS' resources available to the public, as many of the insights to the organization are confidential. It would be worthwhile for researchers to complete a follow-up study on the impact of the lack of in-person visits to get a better understanding of the consequences for that policy on families.

While the virus has created numerous obstacles for families and DCFS alike, these new policies have encouraged DCFS CSWs to get creative in ways that were not previously utilized. This accelerated the introduction to the modern world of video chatting and increased phone communications amongst CSWs and between CSWs and their clients. With the incorporation of these technologies into regular DCFS procedures may contribute to a future of increased communication and therefore potentially safer outcomes for families and individuals in the DCFS system.

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## Appendix A

### Addendum

#### Department of Children and Family Services, Policy and Practices During COVID 19; A Program Evaluation

is a joint graduate project between Jenna Gross and SilVerr Loudermill. This document will explain the division of responsibilities between the two parties. Any additional information can be included in a separate document attached to this Addendum page.

Jenna Gross is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Gathered online public records for Methods section.
- Gathered logic model inputs.
- Gather online public records for logic model inputs.
- Described the meaning of the study's results and limitations.
- Researched the connection between stress and child maltreatment.
- Inputted activities and outputs for logic model.

SilVerr Loudermill is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Thoroughly researched background.
- Researched and described the history of DCFS.
- Researched and described history of coronavirus.
- Transcribing email blasts for results section.
- Researched and detailed DCFS policy changes due to COVID-19.

Both parties shared responsibilities for the following tasks/document sections:

- Collaborated on editing the full document.
- Organized references.
- Formatted paper according to APA requirements.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature Date

Jenna Gross

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Student #1

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\_\_\_\_\_  
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SilVerr Loudermill

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Dr. Susan Love  
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Date

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Dr. Hyun Sun Park  
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Date

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Dr. Jodi Brown, MSW  
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**Graduate Coordinator**  
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Date

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**Department Chair**  
Jodi Brown, Ph.D., MSW

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Date

## Appendix B

### Logic Model Graphic

**Program:** Department of Children and Family Services, Policy and Practices During COVID 19; A Program Evaluation Logic Model

**Situation:** In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the LA County Department of Child and Family Services has seen a decrease in the number of reported referrals despite increasingly difficult circumstances for families

**Mission Statement:** DCFS is dedicated to the safety, wellbeing and permanency of children and families in Los Angeles County. The department’s main mission is to ensure that the two million children who live within Los Angeles County are safe, and that they are able to respond to any child at risk of abuse or neglect.

Inputs	Outputs		Outcomes -- Impact		
	Activities	Participation	Short	Medium	Long
<p>Staff: Director, Chief Deputy Director, 13-member executive team and approximately 9,000 staff (Who We Are, n.d).</p> <p>Supplies: PPE (disposable masks, cloth masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, shoe covers)</p> <p>Budget: \$2,890,600 For the 2020-2021 fiscal year (LACDA, 2020, Pp. 7.6)</p> <p>Facilities: Approximately 20 regional DCFS offices</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Referrals</li> <li>2. Voluntary family maintenance (VFM) and Voluntary Family Reunification (VFR)</li> <li>3. Assessments, interviews, and contacts</li> <li>4. Community resource referrals</li> <li>5. Detentions</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. CSWs, DCFS hotline workers, at-risk families</li> <li>2. CSWs, DCFS supervisors, community agency workers, at-risk families</li> <li>3. CSWs and at-risk families or individuals</li> <li>4. Community agency workers, at-risk families or individuals</li> <li>5. CSWs, law enforcement, at-risk families</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ER CSWs investigate referrals</li> <li>2. Families at-risk of detention receive services</li> <li>3. At-risk families and individuals are assessed by CSWs to determine necessary services</li> <li>4. Families receive services</li> <li>5. Children are removed from potential dangers</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ER CSWs make a recommendation based on their investigation</li> <li>2. Families are assessed for services</li> <li>3. Child(ren) and family safety/needs are regularly assessed</li> <li>4. Families learn skills to increase safety to child(ren)</li> <li>5. Family presenting danger receives assistance and services to help increase child(ren)’s safety</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decrease risk of child maltreatment</li> <li>2. Families with open cases can decrease the risk of children being detained and increase child safety</li> <li>3. Safety is increased for child(ren) for the duration of an open case</li> <li>4. Families increase child safety</li> <li>5. Child(ren) is placed in a safe environment</li> </ol>

**Assumptions**

- (1) Referral rates are decreased due to effects of COVID-19.
- (2) Actual rates of abuse are increasing since March 2020.
- (3) CSWs are continuing services for families with open cases through COVID-19.
- (4) DCFS services increase safety and decrease risk of harm for families and children.
- (5) Foster homes are safe environments
- (6) CSWs are correctly assessing for danger
- (7) Families are receiving necessary services

**External Factors**

- Only certain groups are required to report child maltreatment
- DCFS is a government agency
- CSWs work Monday-Friday only and are off duty on weekends.
- All LA county DCFS offices are currently closed to the public due to the pandemic

Rev. 7/09