The Los Angeles Miracle

NCJFCJ Past Presidents' Corner



Judge Leonard Edwards

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The Fostering Connections Act of 2008 modified the law such that relative placement is now a permanent placement, unlike foster or congregate care. I have visited 49 states and discussed their efforts to place children with their relatives instead of being placed in foster care. No jurisdiction has accomplished what Los Angeles has done. Through best practices developed by the social service districts, Los Angeles now places over 75% of children who had to be removed from home into relative homes, sometimes on the same day. Their protocol includes a second look at relative placement for the 25% not placed with relatives, and the resulting number is about 90%. Of this, over 15% of the placements are with non-custodial parents. No jurisdiction in California or across the country comes close to these numbers. Their protocol is described in articles I wrote several years ago found on my website (judgeleonardedwards.com). One is entitled "The Urgency of Placing Children with Relatives."

The notion that foster care is an acceptable placement for children who are removed from home has ended. Foster care is stranger care. While it is a necessary placement, it should be restricted to cases that have no alternative. It was an easy answer for a social worker who wanted to remove a child from an abusive or neglectful home to drop off the child in a foster home. Now, we expect the social worker to identify relatives and engage them in the process of finding the best home possible if it's not with the child's parents.

The protocol used by social workers in Los Angeles is remarkable. The work for placement starts immediately when a child must be removed from parental custody. The search for relatives and NREFMs (non-related extended family members such as family friends, Godparents, and similar close family friends) is well organized. The office uses a search engine to see if they can identify and locate "lost" relatives. They also especially try to track down "non-offending" fathers, as this identifies both fathers and their extended families. The agency does background checks to ensure a safe placement. I have visited one of these social service districts. I noticed the team spirit to place children with relatives. As former Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court Mike Nash stated: "Our goal is to ensure that L.A. County reflects a kin-first culture with respect to placing children for whom placement becomes necessary."

No longer is foster care or congregate care a first choice for placement. Who should get credit for these significant changes? The entire Los Angeles community, social workers, the Board of Supervisors, the juvenile court judges, community advocates and others.

I am encouraged by the significant changes that have occurred in Los Angeles during my professional life as a judge and advocate for children. Further achievements lie ahead, as the accomplishments of the past 40 years clearly demonstrate our ability to sustain continued success.

