



PRESS ADVISORY

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May 23, 2011

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Keeping Family Ties

Alameda County Social Services Agency

Opens County's First Family Visitation Center for Children and Youth in Foster Care

Oakland CA—Grand Opening and Open House of **The Gathering Place**. Children in the Alameda County foster care system will no longer sit in a sterile office or fast-food restaurant to see their biological parents, siblings or relatives during monitored visits. Instead, they will be able to have a relaxed visit at the newly opened the Gathering Place, 401 Roland Way in Oakland. The Gathering Place grand opening coincides with National Foster Care Month recognized during the month of May across the United States.

When: May 25, 2011

4:00-4:30---Reception

4:30-5:00—Program and Ribbon Cutting

5:00-6:00---Center Tours

Where: 401 Roland Way, Oakland CA, 94621

A partnership between the Alameda County Social Services Agency, Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, and Alternative Family Services led to the opening on Wednesday, May 25th of the County's first family visitation center for children and youth in foster care. Intended to provide a neutral and homelike space for parents, siblings, and extended family to interact, "the place" will provide support to families during the difficult journey of reunification.

"We want to get children back home with their parents whenever possible," said Michelle Love, director of DCFS. "In order to do that we must make sure families stay connected. One primary responsibility for child welfare workers is to ensure every parent and child is afforded the best opportunity possible to reunite as a family, to see each other, eat together, and play together. This type of interaction rebuilds families and helps parents stay focused on what is possible."

A nondescript building whose façade provides no evidence of the transformative processes taking place inside; three types of visitation opportunities for families are available: therapeutic, observed, and supervised.

"The place" has been designed with a family focus to provide opportunities for parent/child interactions, such as doing homework together in the family room, preparing meals for a family dinner, having picnics on the lawn, and even washing dishes. Rooms have been outfitted to meet the needs of teens, infants and adolescents. Opened 6 days per week, visitations are scheduled by DCFS and staff from partner agencies. Hours of operation are Mon-Th: 10:00-8:00PM, Fri & Sat 10:00-4:00PM, Center hours are flexible and will be adjusted to meet the needs of families.

The Gathering Place is one example of DCFS' reform efforts that contributed to a historic reduction in the numbers of children in foster care placements in Alameda County. The department embarked on an aggressive reform agenda 5 years ago that has resulted in a **50% caseload reduction from a high of 3085 children in foster care May of 2006 to a current level of 1587 as of April 2011**. Equally impressive is the **reduction in the numbers of children placed in group home care which has decreased by 41.1%.**

The DCFS has made a philosophical shift in how biological parents, relatives, and foster youth are involved in the decision making process impacting their lives. Gone are the days of closed door placement decisions enacted upon parents and relatives. Instead, the department has moved toward a more inclusive decision making process where biological parents, extended family and foster youth (who are age appropriate) have an equal voice. Some parents who have successfully completed the reunification process after having their child placed in foster care can now be trained and employed by the DCFS as Parent Advocates. Parents acting in this capacity bring a unique perspective to bear on the type of services required to support families based on their own personal experiences. Additionally, they provide support to parents currently involved in the child welfare system when they need it most.

"CPS has really changed over the years in how they work with and involve families when your child has been taken away," said Dorothy Lewis a Parent Advocate and former child welfare client. "They are now more like partners with parents who are trying to regain custody of their kids. It didn't use to be that way. I wish The Gathering Place was around when my children were in foster care. This environment is so different from the office at 401 Broadway where I had my visits with my kids. This is so much more welcoming, supportive, and home like, that's what parents who are struggling to get their kids back need."

DCFS marks National Foster Care Month as one of only two California child welfare agencies participating in the federal title IV-E Waiver demonstration project. LA County is the other. IV-E is the federal funding source for services to children in foster care. The title IV-E demonstration project is a program model that caps IV-E funds for participating counties based on point in time caseload data. This essentially means that federal funds are block granted and participating counties receive no increase in federal monies if child welfare caseloads increase over the original 5 years of the demonstration project. Conversely, if a county's caseload decreases, the federal savings associated with caseload decline can be reinvested into child welfare prevention/earlier intervention services, program expansion and innovations such as The Family Visit Center. Savings realized from DCFS caseload decline and waiver participation provides fiscal resources during very tough budget times to implement new programs and expand successful ones throughout the department. All of these efforts are designed to improve the lives of abused and neglected children and their families.

Those interested in making a tax deductible donation or becoming a Center partner can contact Robin Luckett at 510.268.7927 or email at lucker@acgov.org

REPORTERS NOTE: Parent Advocates and former foster youth are available for interviews prior to the Grand Opening and during.

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