



Los Angeles County  
Children's Planning Council  
*Improving Children's Lives*

**Children's Planning Council Meeting**  
**January 23, 2008**  
**9:30 a.m.**

Room 140, Hahn Hall of Administration  
500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles, California

Present:

- Chair Don Knabe
- Victoria Adams, representing Steve Cooley
- Jon Perry Amos
- Lauraine Barber
- Paul Chung
- Rabbi Bernard Cohen
- Jennifer Coultas, representing Steven Golightly
- Deborah Davies
- Duane Dennis
- Amy Enomoto-Perez
- Dorothy Fleisher
- Chris Floyd
- Felicia Lynn Ford
- Teri Gillams, representing Trish Ploehn
- Jan Isenberg, representing Darline Robles
- Larry Lue
- Jacquelyn McCroskey
- Elisa Nicholas
- Danny Ramos
- José Ramos
- Lisa Cleri Reale
- Bruce Saltzer
- Wendy Schiffer, representing Jonathan Fielding
- Clarence Shaw
- Nina Sorkin
- Robert Taylor
- Jinaro Ray, representing Bruce Chernof
- Mary Helen Vasquez
- Phillip L. Williams
- Mika Yamamoto, representing Russ Guiney

Chair Don Knabe brought the meeting to order at 9:38 a.m. and asked that Council members and the audience introduce themselves. Phillip Williams welcomed Knabe back for another term chairing the Children's Planning Council, characterizing him as a "strong and tireless advocate for children." The Council was established by the Board of Supervisors and relies on that body's leadership, guidance, and financial support. In his supervisory role, Knabe has promoted child care subsidies for working families, encouraged summer job programs for young people, and

demonstrated a commitment to ending homelessness in Los Angeles County. He also supports education reform within the county's juvenile justice system and is a leader in the prevention initiative whose roll-out begins this year. "We are fortunate to have him returning to us," Williams said.

### **Approval of the Minutes of November 28, 2007**

**Phillip L. Williams moved that the minutes of November 28, 2007, be approved as mailed. Chris Floyd seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.**

### **Chair's Report: Supervisor Don Knabe**

Knabe expressed his pleasure at once again chairing the Children's Planning Council, especially as potential budgetary issues require policy-makers to think creatively about services. He introduced his children's deputy, Nick Ippolito, an active and long-time member of his staff.

Partly as a result of recommendations stemming from the Council's recent juvenile justice report, Knabe has embraced education reform in the county's juvenile halls and probation camps as a leading issue. With two out of three youngsters in those facilities now going on to state prison, a culture change that incorporates the true spirit of rehabilitation is imperative. He proposed a summit meeting to bring the health, mental health, and education systems together with Probation in the same way that he has brought law enforcement together with mental health experts in a series of increasingly successful annual conferences over the past several years.

Knabe also looks forward to supporting the Council's family economic success recommendations, which he sees as a groundbreaking plan that "pushes the envelope" around improving economic opportunities for families. "The timing couldn't be better," he said, considering the current housing crisis and talk of recession throughout the country. Ippolito will work with Children's Planning Council staff to meet the plan's fiscal challenges, and Knabe also espoused the idea of pursuing grants from the private sector to test out the plan's concepts.

In conclusion, Knabe expressed his ongoing thanks to the Children's Planning Council for spearheading the Safe Surrender effort in Los Angeles County some years ago. "I've never seen government work so well," he said. "The Council convened forty entities in a matter of days, coordinated efforts with fire stations and hospitals, and had programs up and running in a very short time—including a hotline that operates in 127 languages." Babies still have been lost, but two more were safely surrendered last week, Knabe announced, bringing the total lives saved by the program to 65. Legislative attempts to extend the safe-surrender window from 72 hours to a longer period have been defeated for the time being, although work in that area continues. "You have my heartfelt thanks," Knabe told Council members.

### **Executive Committee Report: Lisa Cleri Reale**

The subgroup developing a new governance structure for the Children's Planning Council is meeting regularly with each other and with other Council stakeholders, and Lisa Cleri Reale praised the "fabulous group of people" involved in the work, thanking them for their frank discussions and extraordinary time commitment. Following another half-day meeting on February 1, consultant Cecilia Sandoval will put together recommendations and a draft plan that

will be reviewed at a joint meeting of the Foundation Board and the Executive Committee prior to being presented to the Council as a whole in March. If anyone has questions or observations about the process, Cleri Reale encouraged them to contact her, Sandoval, Executive Committee co-chair Chris Floyd, or acting chief executive officer Cheryl Mendoza.

Responding to suggestions from Elisa Nicholas and Chair Knabe, Cleri Reale promised to make a first draft of the governance recommendations available to Council members far enough in advance for them to provide input. Comments would then be integrated into the document and the Foundation Board and Executive Committee would review a revised draft, making final adjustments before distributing the proposed plan prior to the March meeting.

### **Acting Chief Executive Officer's Report: Dr. Cheryl Mendoza**

- Part of the Council's recent organizational assessment recommended strengthening its infrastructure to ensure that the SPA/AIC Councils have sufficient technical support and assistance to accomplish their work. To that end, three regional directors have been appointed:
  - ✓ Gabriela Hurtado (SPA Councils 5, 7, and 8)
  - ✓ Marlene Cole (SPA Councils 1 and 2 and the American Indian Children's Council)
  - ✓ Chrysta Wilson (SPA Councils 3, 4, and 6)

In addition, Mark Masaoka has been appointed the director of strategic initiatives, overseeing the mini grants program and the Community Building Institute, and serving as staff to the Strengthening Community Capacity Committee.

- Because of the state budget deficit's critical impact on services to children and families, copies of a summary review of the governor's proposed budget were available at the materials table. A Children's Planning Council policy team is monitoring developments and identifying anticipated service impacts, and will notify Council members as they come in.
- The Children's Planning Council will co-sponsor this year's California Family Resource Association annual policy conference, which focuses on family economic success. A 'save the date' flyer for the April 24 and 25 conference was available on the materials table.

### **First 5 LA Scope of Work: Lilian Coral**

The scope of work for the current Council agreement with First 5 LA has been approved and will be implemented soon. Developing the scope of work involved a consultant-led team of staff and volunteers examining the SPA/AIC Councils' current work and future needs, and convening various stakeholders to review the plan. First 5 LA was pleased with the planning process, and Coral thanked those volunteers and conveners who participated. The scope of work has already been distributed to the SPA/AIC Councils—she will explore posting it on the Children's Planning Council website, as well—and regional directors will work with coordinators and volunteers to incorporate its elements into individual council work plans.

### **Comprehensive Educational Reform in the Probation Department: Chief Robert Taylor**

The Comprehensive Education Reform Committee is a cross-departmental body formed as a result of a June 19, 2007, motion authored by Supervisor Don Knabe and approved by the Board of Supervisors. Ten agencies serve on the committee and it has held ten meetings to date, using seven key reports as a foundation for its work and hearing seven presentations from educational service providers. (An ad hoc group formed by the Children's Planning Council is also fleshing out issues and recommendations; its report will be heard later in today's meeting.) Taylor thanked members of the committee for their work, especially those from the Children's Planning Council and the Education Coordinating Council, and expressed his interest in hearing additional input from community members so that the committee's recommendations may be fully vetted prior to their presentation to the Board of Supervisors in March.

The committee's vision for comprehensive educational reform in the juvenile halls and probation camps is that youth in those facilities, who are generally at an educational disadvantage to begin with, have timely access to:

- Comprehensive assessments and case plans
- The most appropriate educational pathway or pathways for the individual youth
  - ✓ A high school diploma (passing the California High School Exit Exam, or CAHSEE)
  - ✓ A GED (General Education Development) certificate
  - ✓ Career technical education
  - ✓ Preparation for two- or four-year college
- A continuing and expanded commitment to literacy, incorporating Operation READ
- Special education assessments and a full continuum of services to address specific learning disabilities and other special education needs
- High-quality classrooms, educational materials, computers, and other technologies to support interactive 'learning-by-doing'
- High-quality career technical education and vocational education programs
- Classroom and after-school tutors and mentors
- Gender-specific programs, vocational education, and enhanced learning opportunities provided through nongovernmental entities
- Integrated transition services back to the community

The committee has identified key issues and recommendations in a number of areas.

➤ **Educational governance**

- Key issues*
- Inconsistencies in the Welfare and Institutions Code and the Education Code
  - The financial situation within the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) as a result of the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funding constraints and extraordinary costs in the juvenile halls and camps
- Key recommendations*
- Establish the Probation Department as a single point of responsibility and accountability for education in the juvenile halls and camps, giving it the freedom to interact creatively with Mental Health and Health Services, as well as LACOE.
  - Hire a director of social services to serve as the chief academic officer within the juvenile halls and camps.

➤ **Educational responsibilities**

- Key issues*
- Responsibilities of parents and caregivers, the juvenile court, the Probation Department, and educational services providers
  - The protection of the educational rights of youth
- Key recommendations*
- Ensure parent/caregiver involvement throughout adjudication, school enrollment, assessments, detainment, and release.
  - Provide parents, caregivers, and surrogates with the necessary support, tools, and training to carry out their responsibilities.
  - Train probation officers to serve as advocates for youth throughout their detainment and their transition back to the community.

➤ **Assessments and case plans**

- Key issues*
- Multidisciplinary staffing at the camp assessment unit
  - Parent and caregiver involvement in case planning, including IEPs (individual education plans) and ILPs (individual learning plans)

- Key recommendations*
- Ensure timely and comprehensive assessments of criminogenic, educational, health, and mental health needs.
  - Develop integrated case plans, both within camps and for after-care.
  - Integrate camp-to-community transitions programs and services.

➤ **Instructional program**

*Key issue* The Juvenile Court and Community Schools (JCCS) program used is based on a comprehensive high school model, which may not be the most appropriate learning style for all youth in the halls and camps.

- Key recommendations*
- Redesign the JCCS curriculum for juvenile halls and camps to ensure a more effective use of the 300 minutes of education per weekday mandated by Los Angeles County (the state of California mandates only 240 minutes).
  - Develop proposals and plans to pilot new instructional models.
  - Establish alternative educational models, such as:
    - ✓ A charter school for girls in one camp, and a charter school for boys in another
    - ✓ Partnering with neighborhood schools to enhance services for youth returning from juvenile halls and camps
    - ✓ Partnering with community-based organizations to create one-stop centers for career technical education and vocational education, in conjunction with academic and pre-apprenticeship programs in juvenile camps
    - ✓ Establishing community centers throughout Los Angeles County, perhaps in conjunction with the SPA/AIC Councils, to provide mental health and other services to youth returning to the community and (separately) to youth at risk of entering the juvenile justice system

➤ **Special education**

- Key issues*
- One-third or more of youth in juvenile halls and camps require special education services, 70 percent of which are for specific learning disabilities.
  - Many needs are not diagnosed until youth are 16 or 17, when they enter the educational system in the halls and camps.

- Key recommendations*
- Ensure a full continuum of special education services.
  - Support youth with behavioral problems by conducting functional analysis assessments and developing positive behavioral intervention plans, as required by the Hughes bill (AB 2586).
  - Train probation officers to advocate for youth with IEPs.

➤ **After-school and weekend programming**

- Key issues*
- Only 32 hours a week are available for evidence-based treatment, homework and tutoring, educational enrichment, other activities, and visiting hours.
  - A need to better utilize the 25 hours per week that are mandated for recreation/physical exercise for recreational therapy

*Key recommendation* Restructure camp and classroom schedules so there is more time for evidence-based treatment; homework, tutoring, and educational enrichment; and other activities aligned with case plans.

➤ **Educational resources: facilities and classrooms**

- Key issues*
- The physical condition of some classrooms
  - An insufficient number of computers to support interactive learning

- Key recommendations*
- Make maximum use of existing classroom space.
  - Assess the need for additional classroom space and develop an implementation plan.
  - Identify opportunities for establishing vocational education.
  - Establish standards for computer equipment and technology in each classroom; establish a capital budget to fund needs.

➤ **Educational resources: staffing and funding**

- Key issues*
- Number of substitute teachers in juvenile halls and camps
  - Adequacy of ADA funding for JCCS schools
  - Costs of special education services in halls and camps

- Key recommendations*
- Develop a three-year financial plan for educational services in the juvenile halls and camps (separate from other JCCS schools).
  - Support LACOE's proposed legislation to revamp the JCCS funding model to one that is based on residential service delivery, reflects the location of juvenile halls and camps, and fully funds educational services that students are legally entitled to receive.

➤ **Quality assurance**

- Key issues*
- Need for consistency with evidence-based practices principles
  - Accountability for educational outcomes and performance

- Key recommendations*
- Focus on Probation's proposed four educational outcomes and eight educational performance indicators.
  - Amend the Probation/LACOE memorandum of agreement (and any contracts with other educational service providers) to require the monthly or quarterly reporting of prescribed educational outcomes and performance indicators.

The timeline for approval of this plan includes its presentation to the Education Coordinating Council on January 31 and to LACOE and the Probation Commission in early February. It will then go before the Board of Supervisors on March 11 and be presented at the second Community Corrections Collaborative conference on March 17. Its strategies will be incorporated into the Probation Department's strategic action plan, and the resources to implement its recommendations would be approved by the end of the fiscal year, June 30.

"We want successful kids coming out of our system," Taylor said. "We want to prevent them from re-offending and becoming failures, and we haven't been addressing that strongly enough in terms of education. Have we hit all the elements? Are we doing enough, enriching this enough? We want to give them a head start with their education." In conclusion, Taylor mentioned another issue of concern to the Probation Department: the disproportionate representation of Latino and African-American youth in the juvenile justice system. African-American youth make up one-third of the residents in the halls and camps, yet African-Americans are only 10 percent of the overall population in Los Angeles County. "That points to a problem that needs to be broadly addressed," Taylor said. How can those youth be prevented from coming into the juvenile justice system to begin with? How can families of color be strengthened?

Rabbi Bernard Cohen praised Taylor's overall report, seeing particular significance in his concluding remarks. In Cohen's decade of work at a Federal penitentiary, he found the most essential element preventing recidivism tended to be the environment inmates returned to upon their release. If youth in halls and camps return to less than ideal circumstances, all the education they receive while in custody will mean little. "What can we do about the environment that brought them there in the first place?" Cohen asked. "It's a key issue."

Felicia Lynn Ford agreed, especially with regard to special-needs youth and those requiring special education services. She recommended more efforts to involve parents, children's natural

advocates, and professionalizing what they do. "The county has hired nine parent advocates," she said, "but we don't know where they are or what they do. We need practical steps to factor parent advocacy into the budget—parents will talk to other parents, whether they're called parent advocates, family assistance, or family support. We'll definitely get more bang for our buck."

"Parents care," Elisa Nicholas said, speaking from her years as a pediatrician for low-income families, "and they know what to do. But they're often working two and three jobs, bringing up their kids in neighborhoods where everyone's in a gang. We can't just put the onus on parents. Their kids slip away because of their communities and because they can't spend time with them." Duane Dennis wants more attention given to the younger siblings of probation youth, not only from the education perspective, but in terms of their social and emotional well-being. "We need to target those kids early on," he said, "preventing them from entering the same cycle that their older siblings are in. I'd like to see that added to these recommendations."

Mary Helen Vasquez asked about the Probation Department's vision for early intervention, stressing the importance of involving early childhood education programs that help children and families develop the social and emotional skills that directly affect how successful youth are as individuals. (In response to a question about how many youth at the juvenile halls and probation camps had attended preschool, Chair Knabe estimated that probably very few had—"close to zero" was his guess, based on his work with First 5 LA and Los Angeles Universal Preschool.) Lauraine Barber suggested utilizing funds both from the county's prevention initiative and from the Mental Health Services Act's prevention and early intervention component. A financial plan is being developed to leverage dollars from all available funding streams, Taylor said, better integrating monies from multiple county departments such as Children and Family Services, Mental Health, and Health Services. "Some kids who come to juvenile hall or the camps have never seen a doctor or a dentist in their lives," he noted. "That's difficult to accept, but it's reality." He hopes to partner with the USC School of Dentistry and other entities to provide youth with basic health and dental services.

Vasquez also asked about case management for pregnant youth, and Taylor spoke of the parenting classes offered to both young men and young women. He related a story that gang-intervention specialist Father Greg Boyle tells, about a teenage girl who was excited about her pregnancy because it meant she could have a baby before she died. "Addressing the hopelessness and despair in communities," Taylor said, "that's what needs restructuring. These kids are told they are nothing and they'll be nothing. We need to try and change that." To support families economically, Jennifer Coultas offered a closer involvement with the Child Support Services Department. "We can get materials to you," she told Taylor, "so that when families come to pick up their children, they can come and see us. We'd love to work with you and build on your educational reforms." Child Support Services is also developing a new outreach curriculum for teens, providing school-based trainings and seminars on the financial and legal responsibilities of parenthood.

Nina Sorkin asked when charter schools will be established at the camps, and Taylor said that, though his preference would be to do that right away, certain legal impediments exist, such as gaining approval through LACOE or directly from the state. Although Probation has no desire to separate from LACOE's essential services, he added, it has begun preliminary work with several charter-schools organizations and is hoping to develop relationships that will help youth transition more readily from camp charter schools to those that exist in their communities. Barber wants to get

the SPA/AIC Councils' neighborhood action committees involved in the community centers that Probation is planning, and asked about that timeline. Unlike the charter school concept, Taylor said, "I can do that now. We've got some money from the state to bring them up, and our plan is to do that within the next six months. At the conference in March, the SPA/AIC Councils will be involved, and we'll talk about it and get your input."

Jacquelyn McCroskey expressed her happiness at seeing the Probation Department's progress toward making some of the Council's juvenile justice recommendations an actuality, and inquired about funding issues with regard to alternative education. According to a report last year from the state Legislative Analyst's Office, one alternative education funding stream goes through the county's Office of Education and another goes to school districts, sometimes making it difficult for students to transition to and from alternative programs. "Legislators are willing to carry bills about this," McCroskey said. "It's just a matter of how the appropriation is used, and getting an articulation between school districts about accepting these kids. There's an opening in Sacramento that's worth pursuing in an integrated way." According to Taylor, State Senator Gloria Romero recently visited Los Angeles County's halls and camps and expressed her willingness to be involved, and plans are in process to detail the financial structure.

Danny Ramos saw significance in the fact that a spiritual leader, Rabbi Cohen, pointed out the most important part of this plan—not just its academic components, but the spiritual transformation that must occur in communities for youth to find direction in their lives. "We need to continue to do what we can to provide hope," Ramos said. As a former camp probation officer himself, as well as a child abuse investigator and an employee of the state parole system, he sees a deep need to break the cycle of hopelessness and bring what he termed the "sacredness of this work" into the community circle. He invited everyone to the SPA 3 Council's April conference, which is designed to bring hope, vision, and leadership development to that area. "I spoke at Camp Afflerbaugh twice last year," Ramos went on. "Those kids are thirsty for a glimpse of light. Their families are desperate, at the end of their own resources, and they're looking to us to help them. Poverty, addiction, alcoholism are very real conditions, and they're getting worse. We have a responsibility to bring back what's missing in those communities—the spiritual essence that makes communities sacred places." At a parade celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday this past weekend, Ramos saw three buses representing organizations dedicated to stopping children being killed in their communities. "What a cause," he said, shaking his head. "We should be celebrating life, not death."

As a co-convener of the SPA 2 Council, Deborah Davies is very aware of the Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall in Sylmar and the adjoining compound where minors being tried as adults wait for long periods of time before Proposition 21 directives determine their future—doing time in adult prison. "The parents of the compound children have organized," Davies said, "and every one of their stories will break your heart. They want to repeal Proposition 21, or at least change it so that first-time juvenile offenders won't be sent to prison." She urged the involvement of those parents in promoting educational reform in the halls and camps, saying they could be valuable resources. "Their attitude is, 'It may be too late for my child, but not for someone else's,'" Davies said.

The age range of the juvenile probation population is 12 to 19, with the average stay in juvenile hall being around 19 days, while cases are adjudicated. The average stay in a probation camp is about four months. Chris Floyd asked whether youth reside in those facilities long enough to take advantage of the proposed reforms, and Taylor said that data from the Operation READ program

indicates that youth can accomplish tremendous things in four months, sometimes jumping as many as a couple of grade levels. A successful move to a community school is necessary to preserve those gains, however, and an audience member urged the involvement of school nurses in communications about transitioning youth. "We're very rarely asked about these kids," she said, "but they can spend days in our offices for a number of reasons—they're unsuccessful in class, they're having behavioral problems, they're not feeling well. School nurses are a very important point of contact."

A key component for this age group, Rabbi Cohen added, is adult role modeling. Can new role models be programmed in these youth's lives? In terms of staff training, Deborah Davies emphasized the balance necessary between staff safety and the dignity of the youth, as well as the need for a deep understanding on the part of staff about what these young people have gone through. "Pay attention to staff," she urged. "They're the day-in, day-out connection to youth, functioning as their parents, their mentors, their contacts with the world."

Some real opportunities exist for change, Chair Knabe said, noting that just as some youth's first doctor visits occur in the halls and camps, the classroom experience there may also be their first chance to read a paragraph or write a sentence. Knabe looks forward to the committee's report coming to the Board on March 11, and promised that Board members would expect full cooperation from LACOE. "The Board has an incentive here because of the Department of Justice issues that have gone on," he said, "and we're being aggressive to support Bob and getting other departments to support him, too. We hope to have a groundbreaking program here in Los Angeles County." Questions and comments about Taylor's report can be submitted directly to him, and attendees were invited to the Education Coordinating Council meeting next Thursday morning, January 31, at the California Endowment's Center for Healthy Communities, to hear more.

**Children's Planning Council Ad Hoc Education Reform Committee: Deborah Davies and Belinda Walker**

An ad hoc work group to study the education reform effort in the juvenile halls and probation camps was initiated by Sharon Watson at the Children's Planning Council's September 2007 meeting. Along with Children's Planning Council members, departmental representatives to the SPA/AIC Councils, and some direct-service workers from the camps and halls, participating organizations included:

- Education Coordinating Council
- Probation Department
- Public Defender's Office
- Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families
- Helpline Youth Counseling
- Friends of the Family
- Girls & Gangs
- The Advancement Project
- Children's Defense Fund
- New Visions Foundation
- Association for Community Human Services Agencies (ACHSA)

The group met three times, developing a set of proposals that were recommended in December to the county-level Comprehensive Education Reform Committee, whose report Chief Taylor has just presented. Belinda Walker praised the rich discussion and diversity of voices during workgroup meetings, where conversations drilled into the details of the educational system in the camps and halls as well as looking at it on the macro level. Walker's organization, Girls & Gangs, provides individual services and mentoring as well as life-skills workshops in the two girls' probation camps that focus on their transition back to the community.

Walker reviewed some highlights of the work group's discussions, which called for:

- **Broader stakeholder participation** (parents, surrogate parents, and community-based service providers) **in the assessment and service provision process**
- **The consideration of innovative educational provider models and services**  
"The old ways have been a recipe for failure," Walker said. "We need a variety of types of schools in the camps, plus educational opportunities that go beyond traditional schooling. We need experiential, hands-on learning, from vocational trades to high-tech. These kids are bright and talented. Put them in front of a computer, and they soar."
- **Timely and accurate assessments of youth**  
At present, many boys entering the camp system are not being assessed, and no girls are; staff are so overloaded that they can perform only general screenings. "Assessments are key, and we must take them seriously," Walker said. "We need to tease out what more we can be doing for these kids. Everyone needs to understand the reality of what they've been through."
- **Higher standards and objective methods of evaluation for all entities working with youth**
- **A seamless flow of information and communication between and among all services providers, youth, and families**  
"Right now," Walker said, "we can't get transcripts from LACOE to the camps, and we can't get papers into a single packet on the child's release."
- **Better educational governance and accountability**  
Can an educational provider objectively set its own standards and evaluate its own performance? People supplying an educational service shouldn't evaluate that service, as LACOE does now, Walker said. Probation could assign a point person for quality assurance, she suggested, perhaps enhanced by a blue-ribbon panel of community experts to provide the know-how for an ongoing, objective evaluation of reform efforts.
- **A focus on youth development**  
The success of Probation's educational reforms effort depends on its ability to successfully shift from a corrections model to a comprehensive youth development model. "Every one of these kids has been abused in some way," Walker said, "and they need a healing, relationship-based culture. They've had the roughest start possible in life, but they have enormous potential."

Youth development is the purpose of the summit that Chair Knabe has proposed, and Jacquelyn McCroskey suggested that he provide leadership on a cross-departmental conference on the key issues discussed by this work group. "We've been very successful with front-line law enforcement folks," Knabe said, gladly offering his help. "The key is changing the culture."

### **National Children's Study, Los Angeles–Ventura Study Center: Dr. Neal Halfon, UCLA**

The National Children's Study, the largest long-term study of human health ever conducted in the U.S., will examine the effects of environmental influences on 100,000 children across the nation, including 4,000 in Los Angeles County, following them from before birth until age 21. Researchers will examine how children's genetic factors and their environments (chemical, physical, behavioral, social, and cultural) interact on their health and development, specifically looking at outcomes such as birth defects and pregnancy-related problems, injuries, asthma, obesity, and diabetes, as well as behavioral, learning, and mental health disorders. Between \$100 and \$150 million will be spent on data collection using protocols developed by 2,000 scientists, and opportunities will also exist to study additional areas of particular local interest (the impact of preschool on Latino children's language development, for instance).

The national study stems from work done by the 2000 President's Task Force on Environmental Health and Safety Risks to Children, which acknowledged that, compared to adults, children are especially vulnerable to environmental exposures that affect their metabolism and behavior. For many years, Halfon said, doctors believed that certain risk factors determined whether or not people would develop diseases in later life; heart disease, for example, was thought to be caused by smoking, stress, unhealthful eating, and so on. Now researchers are beginning to understand that conditions *in utero* and during a child's first year can cause adult heart disease, and that early life is a very sensitive period. Exposures to agents like lead and alcohol—before conception, in the womb, and after birth—can result in serious developmental effects, and numerous other conditions (learning disabilities, autism, diabetes, asthma, birth defects, premature birth, and so on) are also suspected to have environmental contributions. Existing research is too limited in size and scope to answer many questions, and a longitudinal, life-course study design was needed to correctly link multiple outcomes with multiple exposures.

Researchers recognize that the totality of children's environments and experiences interact with their genetic expression and health care throughout their lives, affecting their physical and behavioral growth and development. The priority environmental exposures to be studied include:

- **Physical**—housing, neighborhoods and communities, climate, radiation
- **Chemical**—air, water, soil, food, dust, industrial products, pharmaceuticals
- **Biological**—intrauterine, infection, nutrition, inflammatory and metabolic response
- **Genetic**—genetic components of disease, effects of environmental exposures on gene expression
- **Psychosocial**—influence of family, socio-economics, community, stress

The priority outcomes to be studied include:

- **Pregnancy**—preterm birth, birth defects, fetal influences on adult health
- **Neurodevelopment and behavior**—cognitive development (IQ), autism, learning disabilities, schizophrenia, depression, adjustment, normal variation, resilience

- **Injury**—intentional and unintentional, violence
- **Asthma**—environmental, genetic, infectious, immune factors
- **Obesity and physical development**—diabetes, pubertal/reproductive development, growth, the obesity 'epidemic'

No single hypothesis has framed the study, but answers to the 'big issue' questions are being sought through the use of the large sample size and reasonable scientific rationale. Some hypotheses to be tested include:

- The possibility that low-level exposure to non-persistent pesticides before conception, *in utero*, or postnatally increases a child's risk of poor performance on neurobehavioral and cognitive examinations during infancy and later in childhood, among those with genetically decreased paraoxonase activity (enzymes that appear in some people's systems but not in others')
- The association of asthma incidence and severity with infections in early life
- The association of an increased risk of schizophrenia with infections and inflammation treatments during pregnancy and infancy

Data will be collected at various points in a participating child's life through phone, in-home, and office visits—including a researcher's presence at every birth—that will encompass questionnaires, medical examinations, lab work, environmental sampling, videos and still photographs, and medical record abstractions.

Seven vanguard centers and 22 new centers have been funded nationwide for this study, and the Los Angeles–Ventura study center will oversee four primary sampling units in Los Angeles County and one in Ventura County, to be introduced in staggered waves from 2009 through 2014. The recruitment of study participants will focus on women in their first trimester of pregnancy (65 percent) and those with a high probability of becoming pregnant within the next four years (25 percent). For every thousand children enrolled in the study, recruiters expect to knock on between 8,000 and 16,000 household doors, turning also to prenatal care sites, birthing centers, and hospitals for help. Recruitment will be geographically based to ensure a representative sample of Los Angeles County.

Study centers will interact with various local partners, including universities, hospitals, research firms, and other bodies, among them the Children's Planning Council, First 5 LA, and the county Department of Public Health in Los Angeles. In addition, community advisory boards have been appointed, and community collaborators—networks of local organizations with an interest in maternal and child health—will help convene work groups in the communities selected for study participation. The community will provide guidance on recruitment and retention issues, publicize the study to potential participants, help develop adjunct studies, use data to positively affect local conditions, and ensure that the research is done in an ethical, inclusive, and culturally sensitive manner. The study will adhere to three principles of community partnership:

- The planning and implementation of the National Children's Study and ancillary studies will be inclusive of all children and families in Los Angeles.

- The governance of all local study activities will be a shared responsibility between study investigators, the steering committee, and the community advisory board.
- Study staff, the steering committee, the advisory board, and work groups will strive to analyze data in a way that is meaningful and useful to program planners, administrators, advocates, service providers, and individuals through Los Angeles County.

More information is available at <http://NationalChildrensStudy.gov>, from Halfon himself at [nhalfon@ucla.edu](mailto:nhalfon@ucla.edu), or from the study coordinator, Emily Barrett, at [ebarrett@mednet.ucla.edu](mailto:ebarrett@mednet.ucla.edu).

During the ensuing discussion, Chrissie Castro pointed out that some Los Angeles communities—American Indians and certain Asian populations, for example—are not geographically based and do not reach a critical mass in any one area. Though the American Indian community was well represented in community groups that were part of study planning, decisions about sampling strategies were made by the national steering committee, Halfon said, although he welcomed ideas about how to present this issue to that body.

In response to Elisa Nicholas's inquiry about when data from the study would begin to be available, Halfon explained that study enrollment will start in 2009 with 250 children, and researchers will complete the enrollment process by 2012 or 2013, though they do not expect to recruit the same number in all years. Birth data will obviously be available first, and researchers will do all they can to disseminate that information as soon as possible. (In preparation for the study, Halfon has been working with Cindy Harding at the Department of Public Health to geocode and map all births and birth outcomes in Los Angeles County over the last six years at the census-tract level; he hopes to make that data available soon.) "The National Study people are well aware of this issue," Halfon said. "The price tag for this study is \$3 billion, about one percent of the NIH [National Institutes of Health] budget, and the funds for it will need to be appropriated by Congress. We'll need to have Congressional support over the next several years, and if no data's coming out, it will be hard to do that."

Nina Sorkin inquired about adopted children, and Halfon clarified that once children are enrolled in the study, they will be followed wherever they go. Felicia Lynn Ford asked if supports would be available for special-needs children, for example, and Halfon said that, although families will be directed to the necessary resources if problems are identified, children enrolled in the study will not be provided anything special. "It's not an intervention study," Halfon said. "We can't intervene to the extent that we start to change results. Parents are making a tremendous commitment in being part of this study, and part of what we need to figure out is how to communicate that. Knowing that they're doing it for the greater good, to know things in the future and help other children—that may not prevail with all families. We need to engage them and make it worth their while."

### **Public Comment**

Steve Sturm from the education and mentoring section of the Department of Children and Family Services invited interested parties to a roundtable meeting next Thursday afternoon, January 31, in the ninth-floor conference room at DCFS headquarters. The meeting will review a survey done last year to determine the communication and resources shortfalls that currently exist in connecting children having developmental disabilities or delays with early childhood education

experiences. (Approximately one in six children are born with this type of delay, and this population makes up between 30 and 50 percent of the DCFS caseload.) Those interested in coming were encouraged to call Sturm at (213) 351-5620 to be put on the list of attendees.

**Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Children's Planning Council is scheduled for:

**Wednesday, March 19, 2008**  
**9:30 a.m.**  
Room 140, Hahn Hall of Administration  
500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles

The meeting was adjourned at 11:35 a.m.

DRAFT