

SEIU 521

BRIEFING ON SANTA CLARA COUNTY CHILD WELFARE - LEGAL CONSULTATION MODEL

June 25, 2024

ABOUT SEIU LOCAL 521

Service Employees International Union, Local 521 represents 53,000+ public-and nonprofit, and private-sector workers in California's Bay Area, the Central Coast, and the Central Valley. Under a Community First vision, we are committed to making sure the needs of our community, and the vital services we provide our community, come first. We believe our communities thrive when residents, leaders, and workers recognize that we are all in this together regarding our safety, health, and well-being.

BACKGROUND

- Full partnership with frontline workers and DFCS administrators is crucial for us to ensure that we are aligning our efforts to make meaningful and effective structure changes in DFCS to keep children and families safe
- Since the publicity around the tragic death of Baby Phoenix, SEIU Social Workers, Supervisors, and SEIU 521 member leaders have been working tirelessly to engage DFCS administration in exchange of ideas and solutions. So many frontline workers have spoken out, provided feedback, and stayed involved with a collective outcome: "to ensure that Santa Clara County DFCS staff are able to meet the needs of every at-risk child to have a safe and supportive environment to live and grow".
- Social Workers and SW Supervisors expressed significant concerns about a policy change which excluded social workers and supervisors from participating in staffing consultations with County Counsel. As a result, crucial first-hand information and clinical assessments were overlooked, and it exacerbated the communication gap between County Counsel and Social Workers. This disconnect negatively impacts child-safety.

TODAY

- Since February 2024, SEIU 521 leadership in DFCS and DFCS administration have engaged in a collaborative process to address the issues raised by the Board of Supervisors in the memo issued on December 19, 2023.
- As a direct outcome of this process, our Social Workers and Supervisors will have a real voice in the staffing process when the revised policy is implemented.
- The discussions leading to this policy were informed by input from many Social Workers and Supervisors. Our process included these key components:
 1. **Conducting Empathy Interviews** – in depth 1-on-1 interviews with Social Workers and Supervisors to draw evidence, their expertise, meaningful insights, and solutions.
 2. **Survey & Learning Meetings by DFCS administration** – DFCS administration shared their data and results from their internal info-gathering efforts.
 3. **SEIU 521 and DFCS Bi-weekly Meetings** – our outcome-driven discussions with DFCS administration provided a productive forum for critically examining and considering the professional expertise of our workers and supervisors.
 4. **Data Synthesis** – insights from Empathy Interviews, combined with data from other investigative and exploratory efforts, shaped the development of the DFCS Legal Consultation draft policy, which is in its finalization stage.
 5. **Finalization of Legal Consultation Policy** – we believe that this draft policy will improve the decision-making process related to removing a child from their family. It leverages the clinical expertise of our social workers and engages all other staff in DFCS to solely make the final decision on the level of intervention for the child and family.

IN CONCLUSION & LOOKING AHEAD

We are optimistic about the progress made during this process. The improvements represent a positive shift from the past. Looking ahead, we aspire to maintain consistency, structure, and clarity in future problem-solving frameworks. We're committed to ongoing collaboration, alongside DFCS administration and the Board of Supervisors to reform the department and ensure that Santa Clara County DFCS staff are able to meet the needs of every at-risk child to have a safe and supportive environment in which to live and grow.

We look forward to working with DFCS management, the Board of Supervisors and community partners to address other serious challenges to our ability to support at-risk families - these include improving recruiting and retention of key positions and addressing other areas such as the Satellite Homes and the Child Abuse Hotline needs. In addition, we will continue to advocate for the increase of supportive services and the availability of community resources for families to address child-safety.