



**Governor's Council on Child Safety and Family Empowerment  
September 07, 2023, 10:00 AM  
Hybrid Meeting**

1700 West Washington Street, Phoenix, Arizona 85007

A general meeting of the Governor's Council on Child Safety and Family Empowerment convened on **September 07, 2023**, notice duly given.

Members Present (14)	Members Absent (8)
Maria Cristina Fuentes, Co-Chair	Dr. Lorrie Henderson
Colleen McNally, Co-Chair	Claire Louge
Berisha Black	Kate Brophy McGee
Pastor Terry Crist	Rachel Mitchell
Obed Escobar	James Molina
Director David Lujan	Torrie Taj
Paul Mulligan	Mark Upton
Katie O'Dell	Ryan Young
Darlene Newsom	
Emily Steiner (proxy for Kathryn Blades Ptak)	
Leslie Reprogle	
Jeffrey James Taylor	
Ginger Ward	
Richard Yarbough	
<b>Staff and Guests Present (7)</b>	
Amy Peep, GOYFF	Karen McLaughlin (Speaker)
Director Tonya Hamilton, GOYFF	Malcolm Hightower (Speaker)
Shayne Johnson, GOYFF	Valaura Imus-Nahsonhoya
Chantel Hutchinson, GOYFF	

**Call to Order**

- **Maria Cristina Fuentes, Co-Chair**, called the Governor's Council on Child Safety and Family Empowerment (CSFE) meeting to order at **10:08 AM** with **14** members and seven staff/guests present. She reviewed the Council meeting procedures, welcomed all those joining via Zoom, and thanked them for their flexibility.

**Approval of Minutes**

- With the quorum met, **Maria Cristina Fuentes, Co-Chair**, requested a review of the **May 11, 2023** meeting minutes.
  - **Pastor Terry Crist** moved to accept the **May 11, 2023** meeting minutes.
  - **Leslie Reprogle** seconded the motion.
- The motion passed with no dissenting votes at **10:11 AM**.

**Announcement**

- **Colleen McNally, Co-Chair**, announced to the Council that Governor Katie Hobbs recently renewed the Council via [Executive Order 2023-18](#). She encouraged Council members to review the order and to reach out if they have any questions.

### DCS Director Lujan Welcome

- **Colleen McNally, Co-Chair**, introduced the **Director David Lujan** of the [Arizona Department of Child Safety \(DCS\)](#) and **Karen McLaughlin** to speak to the Council.
- **Director David Lujan** brought over two decades of child welfare advocacy experience to DCS when he assumed the position in April 2023.
  - Lujan is an attorney who earned his Juris Doctor degree from the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University (ASU). His legal career includes working as the Arizona Assistant Attorney General and the Arizona State Senate Judiciary Committee staff attorney.
  - He decided to run for elected office in 2004 and served as a state representative from 2004 to 2010 and a state senator from 2011 to 2013. During this time, Director Lujan helped launch [Defenders of Children](#), a non-profit organization that provides free legal representation to abused children and adult victims of domestic violence. As a staff attorney for the organization, he worked with the attorney generals in Arizona and Utah to open the first non-profit in Colorado City to provide legal services to victims of child abuse.
  - After leaving Defenders of Children, Director Lujan served as the Chief Administrator for ASU's Preparatory Academy and later as the National Director of Public Policy for Reading Partners, a non-profit organization dedicated to early childhood literacy.
  - Lujan joined [Children's Action Alliance](#) in 2017 to launch its affiliate, the [Arizona Center for Economic Progress](#), and serve as its first Executive Director. In this role, he worked to advance policies at the State Capitol to improve economic opportunities for all Arizonans.
  - He became President and CEO of Children's Action Alliance in November 2020. Under his leadership, the organization achieved many policy priorities, including increased stipends for kinship and foster care providers, expanded access to health coverage for youth transitioning out of foster care, and \$800 million in new annual funding for public education.
- **Director Lujan** began his presentation by explaining he is in his fifth month as the director of DCS. Although it has been challenging, it has also been gratifying to work alongside those within the child welfare system.
- **Director Lujan** shared recent agency highlights.
  - Children in out-of-home care is below 10,000 while keeping children safe and families together. He explained this is a significant milestone and that just a few years ago, DCS had over 19,000 children in out-of-home care. Despite dropping below 10,000 children, problematic disparities exist, particularly with Black and Native American families.
  - DCS has 96% of all positions filled (including field positions) and a decreased turnover rate, allowing staff to be more effective in their roles. The challenge now is to retain the 96%.
  - The New Welcome Center officially opened 2-3 weeks ago. Designed for youth of all ages and developmental stages entering the foster care system, the trauma-informed transition center exemplifies community collaboration for vulnerable children. The Phoenix Children's Hospital will open and run a medical clinic in January or February 2024.
- **Director Lujan** discussed DCS' current goals and objectives outlined in their [2024 Strategic Plan](#). Although the Department has been moving in the right direction, the goal is to continue building on that to create an excellent child welfare system.
  - Goal 1: Grow the number of [kinship providers](#) and community foster homes to reduce the number of children in group homes. Children placed with kin have much better outcomes than children without.
    - Find resources for kinship providers [here](#).
  - Goal 2: Create a supportive culture for DCS staff. This goal would include focusing on compensation, training/workplace development, and providing continuance support; it is key to staff retention. Overall, he wants the culture to have a foundation of kindness, empathy, and transparency from all levels of leadership.

- Goal 3: Focus on prevention and providing resources to children and families before placing them into the child welfare system. The [Office of Prevention](#) and the prevention unit would be responsible for disseminating these resources to families. **Director Lujan** added he would like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars directed toward prevention instead of investigations at DCS.
  - The most frequent reports are of neglect when, in reality, families are experiencing poverty. Therefore, directing these families to the proper resources and only involving DCS if necessary.
- Goal 4: Increase the Department's community engagement, especially with those who have lived experience with the system, and recognize that DCS cannot do it alone.
- Goal 5: Hire a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Director, ensuring that from top-to-bottom, the Department's commitment to diversity and inclusivity.
- **Director Lujan** continued his presentation by discussing the recently discovered undisclosed documents. In 2021, DCS created the Guardian system to fit the needs of people with whom DCS contracts. In 90% of cases, contractors correctly uploaded all documents. The instances with incorrect uploads resulted in a backlog of approximately 95,000 documents in the portal.
  - **Director Lujan** mentioned that they are now working with the Attorney General's Office and the Courts to ensure that there were no cases where the forgotten documents would have influenced the outcome. However, it is hopeful these newly discovered documents would not have influenced the decision in most or all cases but will be the Court's decision, not DCS.
- **Jeffrey James Taylor** commented on the growing population in the State as well as the current cost of living. Due to the number of children in out-of-home care dropping below 10,000, is DCS concentrating on in-home services and prevention?
  - **Director Lujan** responded that that is the first tier of DCS' strategic plan, focusing on in-home services and prevention for people experiencing poverty.
- **Leslie Reprogle** commented that she has noticed challenges for foster care providers and that no desire exists to meet the needs of extended foster care children. She asked what is DCS' plan to engage with current providers.
  - **Director Lujan** responded there are different ways to address this: partnering with service providers and licensing agencies and offering/providing incentives. He added it is common to need to learn how to navigate the resources given. Additionally, by increasing kinship placement.
- **Pastor Terry Crist** asked if the Director could explain the 96% of staff positions filled. When did the Department reach those levels, and how does the Department plan to sustain them?
  - **Director Lujan** answered that it can traced to a year ago when there was a 10% increase in salary. Also, as the caseloads have decreased, staff feel less stress and burnout, which typically leads to turnover.
- **Paul Mulligan** mentioned that when broadening kinship eligibility, there is an issue with insurance not insuring families with "too much risk" and being initially screened out.
  - **Director Lujan** responded that the Request for Proposal (RFP) process will be kept open for another 3-4 weeks to discuss these circumstances. Overall, DCS does not want more barriers for families or caregivers.
- **Karen McLaughlin** is the Director of Fiscal Analysis for Children's Action Alliance and the Arizona Center for Economic Progress, providing leadership on the state budget and tax issues. Before joining in 2005, Karen held various positions with the State of Arizona, including analyst with the Governor's Office of Strategic Planning and Budgeting (OSPB) and the Financial Services Administrator for the Arizona Department of Economic Security. She earned her Master's in Public Administration from Arizona State University.
- **Karen McLaughlin** began her presentation by explaining that the Arizona Department of Health Services (DHS) and the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) received an increase of \$2 billion in funding.
  - Of that, \$971 million in ongoing funding:

- Enrollment changes in K-12 and the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS).
  - Provider rate increases.
  - K-12 education formula.
  - Increasing KidsCare eligibility from 200% to 225% of the Federal Poverty Level.
- \$1 billion in one-time funding:
  - School facilities.
  - AHCCCS critical needs – OB/GYN and necessary access hospitals.
  - Deposits into housing programs – Housing Trust Fund, Homeless Shelter Fund, Military Transitional Housing Fund.
  - Arizona Promise Program increase.
  - Arizona Teachers Academy increase.
  - K-12 alternative transportation (2 programs).
  - School community gardens/campus trees.
  - Consumable music and art supplies.
  - Targeted funding for specific districts.
  - Early literacy.
  - Rural community college districts.
  - “Double Up” food program.
- **Karen McLaughlin** mentioned that specifically within DCS, budget items include the following:
  - Healthy Families expansion.
  - 50 replacement vehicles.
  - Positive Parenting Program for Post-Permanency Placements.
  - Foster Care Comprehensive Services Model.
  - Emergency shelter group homes and transition living.
  - Backfill loss of federal funds.
- **Berisha Black** asked if the backfill loss was due to the social security funds allocated.
  - **Karen McLaughlin** responded that this backfill loss was due to various reasons, such as foster care incentive money, [Title IV-E](#) funds, and enhanced matched rates due to COVID-19.
- **Jeffrey James Taylor** asked about the ‘[Double Up Food Bucks](#)’ program and whether an individual receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits can utilize it for fresh produce.
  - **Karen McLaughlin** answered yes, individuals can take home twice as many fruits and vegetables when they use their benefits at select farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), farm stands, and corner stores.
- To view **Karen McLaughlin's** presentation, click [here](#).

### Casey Family Programs Overview

- **Maria Cristina Fuentes** introduced **Malcolm Hightower** to speak to the Council. He gave an overview of Casey Family Programs, their work with DCS, and how Arizona compares to the rest of the nation regarding child well-being.
- **Malcolm Hightower** is Casey Family Programs’ Senior Director of both Arizona’s direct social work, in both Phoenix and Tucson, as well as system improvement work to develop and demonstrate effective, practical solutions to safely reduce the need for foster care, improve well-being, and secure safe and lifelong families for every child in out of home care.
  - Malcolm returned to Casey Family Programs after serving under former Governor Doug Ducey as the Director of the Residential Utility Consumer Office and Deputy Director at the Governor's Office of Youth, Faith and Family (GOYFF), where he had the opportunity to work with former GOYFF Executive Director and current Council co-chair, Maria Cristina Fuentes.
  - Malcolm is deeply committed to child safety and well-being, with nearly 30 years of experience.
- **Malcolm Hightower** began his presentation by providing an overview of [Casey Family Programs](#). Founded in 1966, Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and [Building Communities of Hope](#) for children and families in the United States.

- Casey operates in all 50 states and with federally recognized Tribal Nations.
- Partnerships and Support in Arizona:
  - Direct Service Offices in Phoenix and Tucson
  - Systems Improvement
  - Indian Child Welfare
  - Judicial Engagement
  - State Policies
    - Casey does not advocate but educates legislatures on best practices for child welfare.
  - Unaccompanied Minors Program
- **Malcolm Hightower** presented a graph (slide 7) demonstrating how Arizona compared to other states on the rate (per 1,000) of children in out-of-home care. Although Arizona is seeing a decrease of 12%, the State is still not meeting the national average.
  - **National average:** 4.8 children in out-of-home care per 1,000
  - **Arizona-specific:** 7.1 per 1,000 (approximately 11,388)
- **Malcolm Hightower** presented a graph (slide 8) demonstrating the nationwide percentage of children in congregate care defined as youth in group homes, shelters, or any other kind of facility (non-family related). The national average is approximately 9%, with trends decreasing. In Arizona, 18% of youth is in congregate care, with trends increasing
  - **Director Lujan** added this is the area DCS has the most work to do (licensing and regulating). The outcomes of a previous class-action suit mandated DCS be under 10% for youth in congregate care. He added that increasing kinship placements will help the child in congregate care and decrease these numbers.
- **Malcolm Hightower** discussed Casey and DCS' strategy to address the number of kids in congregate care.
  - Ending the need for group placement;
  - Advancing a kin-first culture;
  - Partnering with resource caregivers;
  - Case Review to move youth out of congregate care; and
    - **Berisha Black** commented to the Council that they operated on performance-based contracting for foster homes in California. Keeping foster homes to a certain standard ("higher grade").
      - **Director Lujan** stated increasing the quality of life in group homes is essential, adding that as DCS reduces the group home population, that frees up dollars for more practical things.
  - Unpacking decisions about congregate placements.
- **Malcolm Hightower** referenced a graph (slide 11) demonstrating that Arizona is in the middle as it relates to other States regarding the rate of children entering out-of-home care. 2.5 per 1,000 children are entering out-of-home is the national average. Arizona's rate is 4.3 per 1,000 children entering out-of-home care.
- **Malcolm Hightower** continued his presentation by referring to a graph (slide 12). In Arizona, from 2015 to 2022, the Department reduced the number of children entering care by 48%. In 2015, approximately 14,000 kids were joining care. In 2022, approximately 7,000 kids were entering care.
  - **Malcolm Hightower** mentioned that although Black families coming into care has decreased by 40%, they are still entering at a much higher rate.
    - **Director Lujan** commented that if the Department addresses the disproportionality in the system, it is imperative to work with community partnerships, especially those with lived experience with the child welfare system.
- **Malcolm Hightower** referenced a graph (slide 14). Of the referrals that come into the Department that are screened-in, 77% are unsubstantiated. Only 23% of all referrals are substantiated. that increasing kinship placements will help the child in congregate care and ultimately bring those numbers down
- **Malcolm Hightower** explained Casey and DCS' strategy to address the number of unsubstantiated referrals.
  - Get it right on the "front end" or "narrow the crack of the open door."



- Support the development of a robust, coordinated, comprehensive, and sustainable system of Family Resource Centers.
- Mandated Reporters & Supporters.
  - **David Lujan** commented that the highest rates of calls are educators, teachers, and school principals; they also have the highest percentage of unsubstantiated cases.
- **Berisha Black** asked when mandated reports could not call DCS to direct families to the needed resources.
  - **Malcolm Hightower** responded that, ideally, they would be making those calls to resources instead of DCS.
- **Ginger Ward** mentioned teachers don't have the support necessary to fulfill their roles, adding the children's problems are likely not solved by one call/one referral. She stated there needs to be a concerted effort made by the teacher to reach the child as many times as possible.
  - **Maria Cristina Fuentes, Co-Chair**, responded it could be a two-pronged approach where resources and referrals are available to teachers, which would increase awareness and education on the difference between neglect that requires involvement from DCS versus poverty-related neglect.
  - **Director Lujan** mentioned that after speaking with school attorneys, they now educate their teachers to call DCS if they are slightly concerned.
- **Darlene Newson** commented that she has noticed that children in congregate care need a higher level of care/treatment (substance abuse or psychiatric treatment). Although the emphasis is on kinship placements, ensuring these children are provided the care they need should be the priority.
  - **Director Lujan** responded that children in congregate care often have higher needs, and it is common for these kids to be duly involved in the justice and child welfare systems. He added providing the best support for the child and the placement is essential.
- **Pastor Terry Crist** asked what actions DCS has taken to borrow best practices from the states with relatively low rates of children in congregate care.
  - **Director Lujan** responded that Casey facilitates the communication between State directors and meets frequently. They have adopted peer-to-peer learning.
- **Richard Yarbough** asked about costs between kinship placements versus congregate care and how it relates to prioritizing kinship placement, particularly for African American families with data reflecting this demographic with the highest level of poverty rates.
  - **Director Lujan** responded that licensing is key and relayed a personal story from a couple of years ago when the legislature increased the stipend for kinship families from \$75 to \$300, making it easier for families to get licensed and have resources available.
  - **Malcolm Hightower** added congregate care costs approximately \$3,000 per month, much more expensive than kinship placements.
- To view **Malcolm Hightower's** presentation, click [here](#).

### Family Reunification Day Event Recap

- **Colleen McNally, Co-Chair**, gave a recap of this year's Family Reunification Day event. The 'Rally to Reunify - 2023 Maricopa County Family Reunification Day Celebration' occurred on Saturday, June 24, 2023. Over 75 families and 200+ attendees came together to recognize the strength, resiliency, and extraordinary efforts to reunite with their children.
  - Every year, thousands of Arizona children reunify with their families after overcoming the obstacles that caused their children to be removed from their care and placed in foster care.
- **Colleen McNally, Co-Chair**, showed the Council two videos of the event:
  - [ABC 15 segment | Valley Father Reunited with Daughter - Family Reunification Month](#)
  - [Family Reunification Day 2023](#)

### Upcoming Meeting

- **Colleen McNally, Co-Chair**, reminded Council Members that the next meeting will be on **November 9, 2023**, at **10:00 AM** in the Executive Tower and offered in a hybrid format. Council members are welcome to attend in person or virtually.

### Adjournment

- **Colleen McNally, Co-Chair**, thanked everyone for being part of the meeting and asked for a motion to adjourn.
  - **Richard Yarbough** moved to adjourn.
  - **Pastor Terry Crist** seconded the motion.
- The motion passed with no dissenting votes. The meeting adjourned at **11:56 AM**.

Dated September 08, 2023  
Governor's Council on Child Safety and Family Empowerment  
Respectfully Submitted By:  
Amy Peep  
GOYFF