



NEW AZ Families News September 2023 - First Edition

The Department is launching a NEW newsletter for stakeholders with this First Edition. It will be published quarterly. We hope you enjoy remaining apprised of our strategic initiatives in an effort to improve the lives of Arizona's families and children.

On behalf of all DCS staff, thanks for all you do, and thanks for reading.

David Lujan

David Lujan

Director, Arizona Department of Child Safety

NEW Fiscal Year, Fresh Strategic Plan

The team at DCS is excited to share a new strategic plan for fiscal year 2024. You can view the full list of initiatives and metrics [here](#).

Families are the foundation of our communities, and we are committed to working alongside them to ensure the safety and well-being of Arizona's children. That is

why we are amending our mission to prioritize partnering with families, caregivers, and the community to provide a brighter future for Arizona's children.

Our hope is that the strategies and initiatives in the strategic plan will provide the culture, tools, resources, and policies to help support the work our staff is already doing.

The six strategic priorities in the plan are as follows:

1. Supporting strengthening families, which includes ensuring birth families, kinship, and foster caregivers are supported during their time with our Department
2. Create culture characterized by compassion, empathy, collaborative problem-solving, inclusion, transparency, responsiveness and engagement
3. Offer professional development and workforce support and engagement
4. Build better diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility
5. Expand prevention (together with communities, bringing resources to support families)
6. Support values-driven data and technology for transparency and accessibility



NEW Welcome Center

The Department was proud to unveil our new Welcome Center for children entering foster care in August. This new, trauma-informed center has been several years in the making and will serve Arizona's most vulnerable children for years, perhaps even decades to come.

The new 50,000-square-foot Welcome Center will be a child's first stop on their journey to healing.

The facility is designed for children entering care who have experienced significant trauma. It allows DCS staff and service providers to access all needed resources onsite. Children can be assessed both physically and emotionally while

staff work to locate a kinship caregiver or match children with a licensed caregiver.

“At this facility, we can meet the immediate needs of infants, toddlers, elementary-aged children, and teenagers all under one roof,” said DCS Director David Lujan. “At DCS we recognize that a family’s interaction with the child welfare system is often the worst moment in one’s life, even when necessary to keep a child safe. Although our time caring for these children at the welcome center is limited, we strived to create a welcoming, trauma-informed space, helping to ensure the child’s initial experience with the child welfare system is as supportive and caring as possible until they can safely return home to their families.”

The Welcome Center opened its doors to children in March 2023. Since that time, 1,000 children have been served at the center.

“When a child experiences the trauma of abuse and neglect, we must do everything we can to help them heal,” said Governor Katie Hobbs. “This facility ensures that children who have experienced this type of trauma are treated with the compassion they deserve and can truly begin to heal.”

Welcome Center highlights include:

- Crisis response room
- Age-appropriate play and sleeping spaces
- Onsite cafeteria and commercial kitchen to serve children fresh healthy meals
- Three outdoor playgrounds; Toddler, Elementary, and Teen – all built with donated funds
- Sensory room
- Nursery and Day room for infants
- Onsite Clinic (Opening 2024)

Watch the Ribbon Cutting Video:



DCS Reaches Milestone not seen since 2008 - Children in Out-of-Home Care under 10,000

The Department has safely reduced the number of children in care to the lowest level in 15 years.

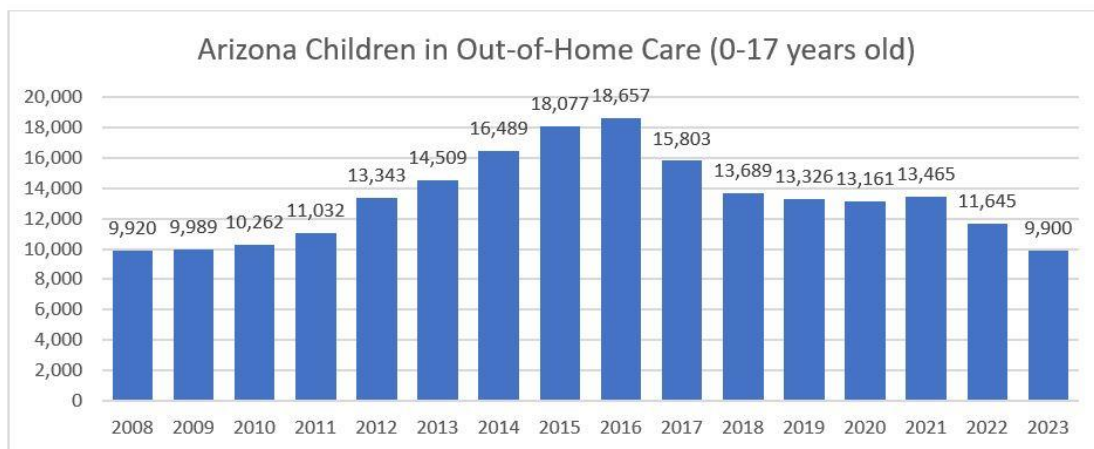
Currently, there are 9,900 children in out-of-home care in Arizona; the lowest level since July 2008. This reflects a 53 percent decrease from a peak of 18,657 kids in 2016. Additionally, there are around 900 young adults aged 18-20 in voluntary extended foster care.

"We are thrilled to announce this milestone," said DCS Director David Lujan. "Our goal is to keep children safe and to support families in crisis. This achievement is a testament to the hard work and dedication of parents, our staff, kinship and foster caregivers, service providers, and community partners. We are grateful for their commitment to Arizona's children."

While there is still more work to do, the transformation of Arizona's child welfare system has been a long journey. Eight years ago, the Arizona Department of Child Safety was plagued with overwhelming caseloads and a skyrocketing number of children entering care; leading to poor results and delayed service delivery.

This was not best for our children, families, and communities. It was important to implement systemic change that would result in better outcomes. The turnaround was the result of several initiatives implemented by the Department including expanding prevention services, increasing support for families, and blending good social work practices with quality improvement efforts.

"This achievement is a testament to the hard work and dedication of everyone involved in the transformation of Arizona's child welfare system," said Governor Katie Hobbs. "The success of Arizona's transformation has been recognized nationally, with other states looking to Arizona as a model for reform. Arizona's achievement is a reminder that with hard work, dedication, and collaboration, positive change is possible."



In addition to lowering the number of children in care, other notable DCS improvements during this time include:

- Eliminated the backlog of over 16,000 inactive cases.
- Revised our safety assessment model and policies
- Implemented Court Authorized Removal process which requires our employees to seek a court order before removing a child, except in exigent circumstances.
- Developed and implemented a supervisory coaching program to reinforce the quality of practice.
- Overhauled our IT infrastructure to launch a mobile app that lessened the time our employees spent on onerous paperwork so they could dedicate more time to working with children and families.
- Replaced the 25-year-old data management system.
- Increased the number of young adults who participate in our voluntary extended foster care program.
- Partnered with Grand Canyon University to develop a full-ride scholarship for foster youth.

Became the first child welfare agency in the nation to integrate behavioral health and physical health with a plan managed by the Department.

"We have worked hard to provide families with the support they need to stay together," Lujan said. "We are committed to continuing our efforts to keep children safe and to support families in crisis. We know that there is still work to be done, but we are proud of the progress we have made and are excited about the future."

Safety · Accountability · Change · Family · Engagement · Compassion · Teaming · Advocacy · Equity

About the Director: David Lujan is the Director of the Arizona Department of Child Safety. David brought over two decades of child welfare advocacy experience to the Department when he assumed the Director position in April 2023. David is an attorney who earned his Juris Doctor degree from the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University. He ran for elected office in 2004 and served as a state representative from 2004 to 2010 and as a state senator from 2011 to 2013. During this time, David helped launch Defenders of Children, a non-profit organization that provides free legal representation to abused children and adult victims of domestic violence. As staff attorney for the organization, he worked with Arizona's and Utah's attorney generals to open the first non-profit in Colorado City to provide legal services to victims of child abuse. David 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.

About the Arizona Department of Child Safety: Our mission is to successfully partner with families, caregivers, and the community to strengthen families, ensure safety, and achieve permanency for all Arizona's children through prevention, services, and support. As highly motivated and caring public servants, the DCS team is committed to fulfilling this mission with excellence, providing safety and well-being for the most vulnerable population in Arizona - our children. If you suspect child abuse, call 888-SOS-CHILD.



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