



AZ Families News December 2023 - Second Edition - Year in Review

For our Second Edition of AZ Families News, we are excited to share our Year in Review. We have accomplished much in 2023, but there is also much more work to do in serving Arizona's most vulnerable children and families.

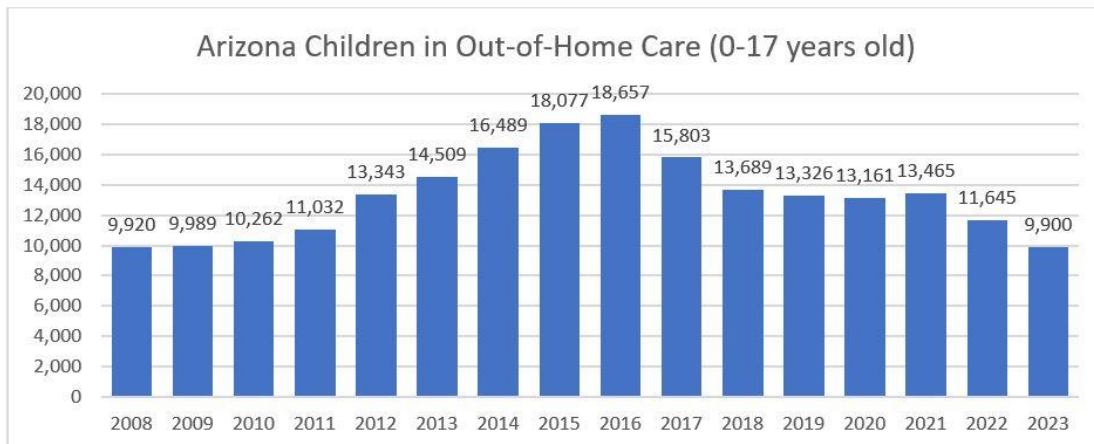
On behalf of all DCS staff, Happy Holidays and we look forward to the New Year.

David Lujan

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CEO, Arizona Department of Child Safety

2023 Department Highlights



DCS reaches milestone not seen since 2008

DCS safely reduced the number of children in care to the lowest level in 15 years in 2023.

In September, the Department had 9,900 children in out-of-home care; the lowest level since July 2008. This reflected a 53 percent decrease from a peak of 18,657 kids in 2016. 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. There are currently 9,600 children in DCS care.

Congregate care levels reach new milestone

DCS believes that every child deserves a nurturing and stable environment, which is why the Department has been diligently working towards reducing the utilization on congregate care facilities. Through collaborative efforts and innovative strategies, DCS is successfully transitioning children into more personalized and supportive settings, such as kinship care and foster homes. This year, DCS achieved a significant milestone in reducing the use of congregate care for children to under 2,000, reaching the lowest level in over a decade.

Reunification and Adoption by the Numbers

In 2023, DCS safely reunified over 3,000 children with their families. In addition, the Department found forever homes for over 1,800 children through the adoption process.



DCS creates savings accounts for children in care

DCS implemented a child-centered program to safeguard the financial well-being of children and families. Under the program, children who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Retirement, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (RSDI) benefits will have their funds placed in a Personal Needs Account. This innovative approach will enhance transparency; increase support for children and their families; and improve the process of transitioning benefits when a child leaves foster care. By adopting this child-centered approach, DCS aims to ensure that every child's needs are met and their best interests are prioritized.



NEW Trauma-informed Welcome Center Opens

The Department partnered with the community to create a Trauma-informed Welcome Center designed to specifically serve the immediate needs of children as they come into state care. 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 on-site. Children can be assessed both physically and emotionally while staff work to locate a kinship caregiver or match children with a licensed caregiver.

Specific new amenities of the center include: a crisis response room, age-appropriate play and sleeping spaces, on-site 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 (pictured with toddler outdoor play area in background).



NEW Strategic Plan Emphasizes Family Support and Prevention

The Department has set strategic priorities to support families and emphasize prevention. Specific goals include increasing the percentage of kinship caregivers who are licensed, increase the percentage of children in care who live with kin and increasing their supports, increase the number of community foster homes, and reduce the use of congregate care. Prevention goals are to decrease the rate of calls to the DCS Hotline per 1,000 children in Arizona, decrease the rate of child entry into care and decrease the rate of repeated DCS reports within 12 months.

TDM TRANSFORMATION



Team Decision Making (TDM) Transformation

As part of our strategic plan, the Department seeks to transform and improve Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings. Goals of the transformation are to improve family and participant experience, improve feedback for continuous improvement, and to clarify guidance for when TDMs are needed (or not needed.) The transformation began over a year ago by consulting with Evident Change, the proprietors of the Team Decision Making™ (TDM) approach, in reviewing fidelity to the TDM meeting model as well as alignment with our SAFE AZ practice model. During this year, we invited community members, parents, and young people with lived TDM experience to work alongside us in order to improve our practice. Training will be provided to all staff who work with families and the Department is looking forward to the new TDM protocol becoming a reality in the new year.



Luggage of Love

When children enter foster care, they often have little time to pack their belongings. As a way to provide some comfort to these kids, DCS partnered with 11 Arizona Larry Miller Auto Dealerships to sponsor our 3rd annual Luggage of Love Drive. The 11 dealerships in Phoenix and Tucson provided 366 brand new, carry-on-sized suitcases in every bright color and fun children's theme. Each suitcase was filled with pajamas, pillows, blankets and socks. These items provide invaluable comfort to children when they need it most. We appreciate the kindness of Larry Miller Auto, its staff, and its customers.



Giving Tree

The holidays can be especially challenging for kids and youth in DCS care. Everyone should feel loved and remembered during this special season. In its 8th year, DCS' Giving Tree program offers a way for our Arizona community to provide personalized gifts for our children and young adults.

This year, over 100 community partners throughout Arizona provided 400 brand new bikes, as well as thousands of toys, games, clothing, and other special gifts for over 5,000 kids in Arizona's foster care system. We are so grateful for the kindness and generosity of the participating businesses, churches and supportive organizations.

Looking forward to 2024

Maricopa Welcome Center to add On-site Clinic

Plans are underway to add an on-site health clinic at the Maricopa Welcome center. This 50,000 square foot center opened officially this year and serves an average of 20 children per day ranging in age from 0-18 as they enter foster care. The on-site clinic will reduce the Department's reliance on mobile health clinics and provide a more comfortable, trauma-informed space for children to receive their check-ups. The clinic will also become a resource for foster families in the vicinity, providing continuity of care for children that have experienced trauma.

Remodel/Refresh Pima Welcome Center

In light of the huge success we celebrated with the Maricopa County Welcome Center Grand Opening, it was clear that the Pima Welcome Center would also benefit from a refresh. Although the number of children served at this location is just a fraction of what Maricopa County sees, this location definitely needed some TLC. The committee has already started addressing those needs including touch up paint and repainting main areas, replacing furniture, updating toys and adding signage as well as researching options for an added playground.

DCS to add DEIA Leader to Executive Team

In order to better address disproportionality in Arizona's child welfare system and to ensure our staff as well as the children and families we serve have access to appropriate accommodations and are treated equitably, the Department will be adding an executive leader to help prioritize and drive our strategic initiatives relative to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility. Through these efforts we will help to strengthen families, especially those that have been historically marginalized, for generations to come and contribute to a more inclusive Arizona.

Creating a Community Hub

In conjunction with the Department of Economic Security (DES) and Pilgrim Rest faith community, a community HUB will be created in an effort to reduce the disproportionate representation of Black and African American children and families involved in the child welfare system. The HUB will connect families to culturally attuned and trauma-informed providers while also cultivating a culture of support instead of report in the community.

The Community Hub at Pilgrim Rest is designed to provide alternative intervention and prevention strategies for meeting the needs of the community and address the disproportionality of African American and Black children in the child welfare system. Since the Pilgrim Rest Foundation (PRF) is a known and trusted source in the community, which already serves Black and African American families with wrap-around services, the implementation of the Community Hub pilot will be a natural extension of the work being done. This pilot program will be concentrated in specific zip codes where DCS historically has a high rate of intervention and removal of African American and Black children.

Extended Foster Care Coaches Program

Every year, hundreds of youth in Arizona turn 18 while in foster care without family support. DCS believes each of them should have the opportunity and support they need to reach their full potential as successful adults. That's why DCS is implementing a community-based program that acts as a bridge from foster care to successful adulthood.

The program, LifeSet, is an intensive program that focuses on meeting the unique needs of each youth in care as they navigate the challenges of adulthood. LifeSet specialists will counsel young adults by helping them secure housing; pursue educational and employment goals; access medical and mental health services; and develop skills like cooking, shopping, and budgeting. The program will begin in early 2024.

Kinship Support Services

Oftentimes, relatives are asked to care for a family member's child while they are in foster care. While they want to help, the expenses and navigation of child welfare can be overwhelming for a family who never envisioned they would be caring for their family members' children.

To alleviate these expenses, DCS is amending its provider contracts in 2024 so providers can now help kinship caregivers become licensed quicker in order to receive the services needed to care for their loved ones who are in care.



DCS Sunset review scheduled for January 3, 2024

State agencies are periodically reviewed by the Arizona Legislature to determine if an agency should continue or if it should be eliminated. On January 3, 2024, the Joint House and Senate Health and Human Services Committee will hold hearing on whether or not the Arizona Department of Child Safety should continue. The hearing is scheduled to begin at 9 a.m.

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

About the CEO: David Lujan is the CEO 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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