

## **L.A. County Celebrates Family Reunification**

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In 2007, Jamilah Shamsid-Deen's life was in chaos.

She was addicted to drugs, and her five children were taken away by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services.

But life for her is better these days.

Shamsid-Deen was one of the department's stories highlighted for Family Reunification Week, which is being observed in Los Angeles County from March 1 to 7.

This week marks the reunions of parents and children separated by the court system.

"We are extremely grateful to (Los Angeles Juvenile Court) Judge (Michael) Nash for this innovative recognition acknowledging the successful efforts of thousands of families that have reunited and provided for the safety of their children," Patricia S. Ploehn, the county's DCFS director, said in a press release, adding the department is also "indebted to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors for actively supporting this week-long celebration."

The department offers a host of programs, including helping mothers find housing and employment to providing mental health assistance for children.

Shamsid-Deen said the services are very important, especially for a mother who has gotten her kids back and is trying to do better in life.

"It's a hard situation when you have your children removed from you and there seems to be no one out there who has your best interest," Shamsid-Deen said. "You have a lot of moms who get their kids back, but they don't have housing, they don't have an income, and they are pretty much left by themselves."

Reco Varnado, a personal trainer, knows the difficulties parents encounter when navigating the system to reunite with their children.

When Varnado's son was taken from his mother due to neglect, DCFS asked him to come down to their office, he said.

"That day they gave me my son ... but, by the end of the day, took him back for false allegations," Varnado said.

After several months of going through the court process and seeking his son through another means, Varnado was eventually reunited with his child.

After his experience, Varnado decided to help parents who experience similar circumstances, and is now a mentor parent with Parents In Partners (PIP), which helps parents reunify with their children.

"I wish I had known about Parents In Partners (when I was getting my son back). It would have been less stressful," Varnado said. "I had to navigate myself and basically learn the system myself. I went on the Internet, did some reading."

For more information about DCFS' programs and services, call (323) 965-6177.

For more information on PIP, call (213) 351-5507