



Office of the Governor
JOHN BEL EDWARDS



CHALLENGES MET. PROGRESS DELIVERED.

Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services,
2016–2023

Contents

- 01 Introduction 4
- 02 Progress Delivered 6
- 03 Challenges Met 18
- 04 Leaving Louisiana Better 21
- 05 Stories of our Success 25
- 06 By the Numbers 26



Introduction

Message from DCFS Secretary Terri Ricks

The Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services has been called "the heart of state government." It's little wonder, given the agency's responsibility for vital child welfare, family support and emergency preparedness services for Louisiana residents, often at the most vulnerable times of their lives. Since 2016, DCFS has served as many as a third of the state's residents at moments of distress or natural disaster. The agency's mission of "working to keep children safe, helping individuals and families become self-sufficient and providing safe refuge during disasters" is the primary focus of each DCFS employee, and our shared purpose has never been tested more than during the past eight years.

Working with Governor John Bel Edwards, agency partners and others, DCFS has achieved gains in programs throughout the department in ways that will impact Louisiana's children, families and communities for generations to come.

In our **Child Welfare Division**, the department extended the age of foster care and strengthened foster care and adoption programs for Louisiana's most vulnerable children and youth while also working to empower families. Among the specific achievements since 2016 were:

- **Extending foster care to age 21.** From the program's launch in 2019 until May 31, 2023, there have been 517 youth enrolled in the EFC program.
- **Working with First Lady Donna Edwards to launch Louisiana Fosters**, which created a statewide network of support for foster caregiving and adoption.
- **Achieving record adoptions from foster care** – 5,600 adoptions in all through May 31, 2023 -- including increased adoptions for siblings, children with special needs, teens and even young adults.
- **Reunifying 14,578 children with their families or relatives** through May 31, 2023.

Supporting families with basic needs is a primary prevention against child abuse and neglect. Those needs have been magnified by an unprecedented pandemic and a slew of natural disasters. The DCFS **Family Support Division** responded by:

- **Expanding SNAP eligibility for families and increasing access to benefits.** DCFS implemented Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility. It also launched the nation's first wide-scale virtual DSNAP operation and SNAP Online Grocery Purchasing during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide better access to benefits.
- **Delivering more than \$14.6 billion in food assistance since 2016 to about one in three Louisianans.** This included about:
 - \$10.8 Billion in record SNAP benefits (through May 2023)
 - \$2.2 Billion in extra SNAP COVID Emergency Allotments (extra benefits)
 - \$1.3 Billion in Pandemic EBT to 5,711,997 children on free or reduced price school meals, as of August 10, 2023
 - \$283 Million in DSNAP benefits
 - The estimated economic impact of DCFS's issuance of federal benefits in Louisiana since 2016 was \$22.5 Billion.
- **Creating the Workforce Development unit and expanding SNAP E&T, STEP and Child Support E&T workforce programs** across the state
- **Doubling benefits under the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program** (Family Independence Temporary Assistance or FITAP cash assistance and the Kinship Care Subsidy Program)

“

We delivered more than \$14.6 billion in food assistance since 2016 to about one in three Louisianans.

Grappling with the aftermath of natural disasters is a fact of life for Louisiana residents, affecting the stability and well-being of families and the safety of their children. This is why responding to disasters is a major responsibility of DCFS as the lead agency for Emergency Support Function (ESF) 6. Since 2016, DCFS staff, led by the agency's **Emergency Preparedness Division**, responded to seven major disasters: the 2016 Floods (affecting 56 parishes in North and South Louisiana) and Hurricanes Harvey, Laura, Delta, Zeta and Ida. The task greatly increased when our sheltering responsibility during hurricanes Laura, Delta and Zeta coincided with a peak pandemic (COVID-19) crisis.

- In a record for Louisiana emergency sheltering, DCFS coordinated sheltering for 18,213 Hurricane Laura evacuees over eight months in emergency non-congregate (hotel) shelters from August 23, 2020, to April 28, 2021.
- The agency contracted with LA 211 Statewide Network for texting and phone communication during disasters, providing a crucial link for residents seeking shelter, DSNAP and other disaster-related resources.
- The department identified and transitioned to a new evacuee registration system. The new system brought a much-needed modernization to the agency, helping speed-up registration and proving much more reliable in supporting post-storm recovery.
- The agency greatly enhanced its working relationship with partners, such as the American Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). With the support of the Governor's office, DCFS has taken its relationships with NGOs to the next level in supporting Louisiana residents during a disaster. The result has been greater shelter capacity and better communication between DCFS, NGOs and agency clients.

Stabilizing the Workforce

As DCFS was addressing these challenges and serving Louisiana families at their hours of greatest need, we were also struggling with a staffing shortage due to the pandemic.

The department increased its focus on staff recruitment and retention. We worked with the Governor's Office and Division of Administration to raise pay, provide incentives and implement employee assistance programs and other supports specifically designed to improve work-life balance and promote a culture of belonging. The department also teamed with State Civil Service and the Louisiana Workforce Commission to hold 14 hiring fairs statewide between September 2022 and May 2023, which resulted in an increase in the department's full-time equivalent by 417 people. Most notably, new hires outpaced staff separations by 60 percent since July 1, 2022, marking welcome progress in staff retention.

Expanding Community Supports for Families and "No Wrong Door" Approach

While our department was working to stabilize its workforce, we were also strengthening community supports around families. The department expanded efforts to implement a "No Wrong Door" approach to services, signing a formal agreement in January 2022 with Louisiana Association of United Ways to establish a 211 partnership to help Louisiana residents find resources in their neighborhoods. In April 2023, the agency expanded My Community Cares, an initiative that helps marshal an array of resources, neighbors and nonprofit and faith-based partners to empower families and build safer, brighter lives for Louisiana's children. The goal with both LA 211 and My Community Cares is to point families to resources and help prevent issues that bring children into the care of DCFS.

Increasing access to services and serving families' needs has been an increasing focus of DCFS leadership and staff since 2016. Joining forces with an impressive array of local and national partners, the department is increasing its outreach to diverse and underserved populations, redesigning benefits systems to improve the experience of the user and strengthening community supports and services for positive outcomes for Louisiana children and their families.

Progress Delivered

2016

Departmental Reorganization

In 2016, as DCFS was responding to two major flooding events affecting parishes throughout North and South Louisiana, the agency was also embarking on sweeping organizational change. In an effort to provide more effective service delivery and response to the public, the department realigned staff and programs into two primary program divisions organized by areas of expertise and bodies of work: the Division of Child Welfare and the Division of Family Support. Here are the primary initiatives the department advanced in the first year:

Child Support

The DCFS Child Support Unit:

- Required employers to report child support lump sum payments in an amount of \$300 or more when they have received notice to withhold child support.
- Improved child support procedural due process by moving freeze and seize hearings to the Division of Administrative Law. These hearings involve the freezing and seizure of a non-custodial parent's assets.
- Implemented the Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Final Rule. This rule included amendments to child support guidelines to consider 14 factors when determining voluntary unemployment.

Child Welfare

In August 2016, DCFS embraced a major shift in the approach to foster caregiving, with its launch of **Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) Louisiana**. QPI aims to strengthen foster care by redefining expectations for foster caregivers and offering resources and tools to provide children and youth the loving, committed, skilled care they need. When QPI is successful, caregivers, DCFS staff and birth parents work as a team to support children and youth and to move children more successfully to a permanent setting.

- Also in 2016, the agency collaborated with the **Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption** and its signature program, **Wendy's Wonderful Kids**, to place adoption recruiters in each region of the state focused on finding permanent homes for foster children and youth who have been more challenging to place.
- The Child Welfare Division developed an **On-The-Job Training (OTJT)** model for child welfare staff through a pilot program in Baton Rouge. The pilot revealed that employees supported through hands-on application had more confidence and competence in child welfare practices, and with a more realistic picture of the work involved, they were more likely to stay on the job.

Disability Determination

- DDS exceeded both initial and **Continuing Disability Review** goals. The unit's overall accuracy of 98.4 percent exceeded the national average of 97.4 percent. Consultative Exam rates continued to decrease which resulted in reduced costs.

Legislation Successfully Passed

Act 90	Rep. Hoffman	Restructured DCFS to provide more effective service delivery through two program divisions, the Division of Child Welfare and the Division of Family Support.
Act 301	Sen. Barrow	Transferred the Council on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren from DCFS to the Children's Cabinet Advisory Boards.
Act 118	Rep. Moreno	Established greater information sharing and collaboration between DCFS and DHH regarding the Child Death Review Panel, while maintaining confidentiality and family privacy.
Act 29	Rep. Johnson	Made the collection of past-due child support easier, enabling DCFS to quickly verify a delinquent parent's employment status and income.
Act 11	Rep. Johnson	Reduced fees owed to the Department of Revenue from \$25 to \$4, in cases where DCFS seizes tax refunds on behalf of parents who are owed past-due child support payments.
Act 217	Rep. Johnson	Repealed an obsolete portion of the vital records law regarding paternity declarations.
Act 253	Rep. Johnson	Amended the law on cash medical support for child support purposes to become compliant with federal regulations.
Act 359	Rep. Johnson	Moved hearings regarding seized assets in past-due child support cases from the district courts to the Division of Administrative Law.
Act 407	Rep. Schroder	Clarified that the Louisiana public defender system shall represent indigent and absent parents in child welfare court proceedings.

Child Support

- DCFS gave parents who make child support payments through the agency the ability to make cash payments through **MoneyGram** online through an app or at Walmart, CVS or any of MoneyGram's estimated 780 locations in Louisiana.

Child Welfare

- DCFS joined **First Lady Donna Edwards** in launching **Louisiana Fosters**, a statewide campaign to link government, faith, nonprofit, business and community organizations to create united support for Louisiana's foster care system. Louisiana Fosters featured a website that offered ways for individuals and organizations to support foster caregivers in their communities.
- In July 2017, the **Wendy's Wonderful Kid's (WWK) Program** received a three-year grant to expand its foster caregiver recruitment program from four recruiters to eight.
- DCFS was selected to partner in a five-year cooperative agreement with the **Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD)** and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The partnership was formed to test evidence-based strategies to strengthen and support the Louisiana Child Welfare workforce. The Child Welfare Job Redesign intervention was developed and implemented through this project.
- The department launched an online Safe Haven Directory/mapping tool designed to help the public locate hospitals, fire stations and other facilities where they can legally relinquish a newborn through the Safe Haven Law. The tool is available on the DCFS website.

Legislation Successfully Passed

Act 298	Rep. Billiot	Authorized electronic requests to the Office of Motor Vehicles for license suspensions due to nonpayment of child support.
Act 348	Sen. Robert Johnson	Clarified state central registry administrative procedures.
Act 151	Rep. Franklin	Made technical amendments to the Children's Code.
Act 59	Rep. Bagley	Established procedures for the acceptance of a child surrendered for adoption.
Act 359	Rep. Horton	Strengthened the laws regarding prenatal neglect.
Act 141	Rep. Carpenter	Authorized the disclosure of autopsy-related information by coroners to DCFS.

Disability Determination

- In an effort to meet a federal mandate to eliminate the **Single Decision Maker Prototype Test** in disability determination, DDS worked hand in hand with the federal Social Security Administration to initiate a pay increase package for DDS staff to make it easier to hire more entry-level professional staff to meet the goals. DDS exceeded all production goals, with an accuracy that exceeded the national average. In addition, the unit's average processing time improved from the previous year, resulting in better customer service.

Economic Stability

- DCFS conducted a Disaster SNAP operation (February 21-24, 2017) in response to a tornado in New Orleans. **The department requested DSNAP by census block, the first such approach in the nation,** based on damages assessed by GOHSEP.

Emergency Preparedness

- DCFS staff coordinated **evacuation and sheltering for Louisiana and Texas evacuees from Hurricane Harvey**. Staff also **sheltered 1,928 evacuees** in the Alexandria Mega Shelter and Jewella shelter in Shreveport.

Disability Determination

- DDS formally changed entry-level job titles from Social Services Analyst to Disability Determinations Examiner to more accurately reflect the nature and difficulty of the position. DDS also added a third level of examiner to its job series to more accurately reflect the DDS structure nationally.

Child Welfare

- **Youth Villages** awarded DCFS a three-year, \$3 million grant to expand services for transition-age foster youth. DCFS was one of four agencies receiving matching grants to implement the LifeSet Case Management Model for the **Extended Foster Care (EFC) Program**.
- The Administration for Children and Families awarded DCFS an initial grant to develop a **Kinship Navigator Program to support kinship caregivers**.
- **Child Protective Services Appeals** -- Beginning August 1, 2018, any individual with a valid finding as a perpetrator of child abuse or neglect as the result of a Child Protective Services Investigation was provided the right to an administrative appeal of the valid finding decision. The Protective Services Review Team reviews all valid findings once an appeal has been requested or for further administrative reasons when it may affect a client's employability, or volunteer rights. There have been 2,533 appeals through May 31, 2023.
- DCFS partnered with **Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)** for a volunteer and foster caregiver recruitment campaign.

Legislation Successfully Passed

Act 6	Rep. Hoffman	Recreated DCFS and established a new sunset date.
SCR 1	Sen. Barrow	Requested DCFS to study extending the age of foster care to age 21.
Act 649 SCR 10	Rep. Gatti Rep. Barrow	Extended foster care from age 18 to age 21 with bipartisan support.
Act 207	Rep. Chaney	Expanded the ways DCFS receives reports of abuse and neglect.
Act 134	Rep. Stagni	Revised the Safe Haven Law to enable parents to surrender certain infants to DCFS at designated emergency care facilities safely and anonymously.
Act 90	Rep. Johnson	Authorized DCFS to seek judicial review in appeals involving reports alleging abuse or neglect.
Act 520	Rep. Johnson	Authorized DCFS to share confidential information regarding child abuse and neglect with courts and district attorney's offices.
Act 160	Sen. Barrow	Authorized DCFS to release certain information, if consent is provided by a former foster child or his guardian.
Act 373	Sen. Perry	Revised the procedure for commencement of child support actions to comply with federal law.
Act 166	Rep. Miller	Authorized Medicaid to be considered as health insurance for child support purposes, and allowed cash medical support to be provided by the non-custodial parent.
Act 194	Sen. Magee	Authorized DCFS to access records of internet service providers for child support enforcement purposes.
Act 136	Rep. Marino	Provided relative to the suspension of child support when the noncustodial parent is incarcerated.
Act 379	Sen. Colomb	Gave courts additional discretion to modify child support awards.
HCR 21	Rep. Garofalo	Requested DCFS to study the expedited process fee paid by child support obligors.
SCR 39	Sen. Johns	Created the Child Protection Act Advisory Commission.

Child Support

- **Child Support Modifications**. DCFS removed the requirement that there must be a 25 percent change for a court to modify a child support order. Instead, courts can modify any substantial and continuing change in the child support amount.
- The department clarified that **incarceration cannot be deemed voluntary unemployment**. This clarification ensures that individuals who are incarcerated cannot be penalized or treated as voluntarily unemployed when determining child support obligations.

Workforce Development

- Partnered with **United Way of Southeast Louisiana (UWSELA)** to expand workforce training programs to SNAP recipients in seven parishes in Southeast Louisiana. UWSELA coordinated its members' efforts to provide workforce training through the SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) program, which helps SNAP recipients gain skills, training and work experience to increase their ability to secure regular employment and achieve economic self-sufficiency. As a DCFS partner, UWSELA facilitated the reimbursement of eligible SNAP E&T expenses for nonprofit organizations providing job search assistance, job search training, education and vocational training services for SNAP recipients in Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa and Washington parishes.

Child Support

- Shortened the timeframe to provide services when parents bring **private orders to Child Support** for enforcement by automatically redirecting support without court action.

Child Welfare

- DCFS Child Welfare added a **Wendy's Wonderful Kids** recruiter for the Extended Foster Care Program.
- DCFS partnered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families' Children's Bureau in a pilot program for the development of **Louisiana's Program Improvement Plan (PIP)**. The plan outlined strategies to address the areas of Quality Assessments, Workforce, Engagement, Service Array, and Quality Legal Representation. Through this partnership, DCFS was able to complete all action steps outlined in the PIP by the deadline of May 31, 2021, which was recognized as an expeditious timeframe for completion. Following the Program Improvement Plan (PIP), the Regional Program Specialist Team (RPS) was re-established to address and improve child welfare practice and implement new initiatives.
- The **My Community Cares (MCC) Program** began as a pilot in **East Baton Rouge, Livingston, Rapides, and Caddo parishes** as a part of the DCFS-Child Welfare Program Improvement Plan. The program focuses on reducing abuse, neglect and out-of-home placement of children through community engagement and support.
- DCFS received the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' National Award for Excellence in Adoptions**. The agency was cited for **three consecutive years of record adoptions from foster care and a 30.8% increase in teens adopted in FFY 2018 over FFY 2017**.

Legislation Successfully Passed

Act 400	Sen. Barrow	Further extended the age of foster care in Louisiana from 18 to 21.
Act 17	Rep. Hill	Limited the amount that can be placed in trust for a minor in DCFS custody and revised other requirements relative to trusts.
Act 241	Rep. Johnson	Parents of children placed in foster care were deemed to have made an assignment of their rights to DCFS for child support purposes.
Act 243	Rep. Cox	Required the Bureau of Criminal Identification and Information to release certain criminal history record information to DCFS.

Disability Determination

- DDS began piloting the new **Disability Case Processing System (DCPS)**, a national system rolled out by the Social Services Administration, and the state of Louisiana was one of the first states in the nation to pilot this system as well as the first state in the Dallas Region. This successful pilot is now used nationwide in all DDS operations.

Economic Stability

- DCFS partnered with **Code for America** on the **LA'Message Pilot**, a one-way text messaging service that sent reminders to SNAP and FITAP benefit recipients at critical points throughout the enrollment and renewal process. The goal was to reduce "churn" by keeping recipients on track with their benefits.

Child Support

- Began shift to **Family-Centered Child Support**. The program formed the family-centered child support collaboration workgroup consisting of DCFS staff, a district attorney, a hearing officer and a judge with the goal of developing definitions of ability to pay and incorporating the definition into new processes, policies and trainings.
- Amended civil contempt procedures to **prioritize the ability to pay and establish grounds for contempt findings**. This change ensures that individuals who genuinely cannot afford to pay child support due to financial circumstances are not unfairly punished.

Child Welfare

- Partnership with National Safe Haven Alliance Hotline** - The department partnered with the National Safe Haven Alliance (NSHA) to offer a 24/7 Hotline staffed by highly trained crisis response experts, who use a holistic approach to help parents considering relinquishing their baby under Louisiana's Safe Haven Law. The NSHA crisis response team uses a three-tiered approach to walk callers through their options — including parenting, adoption, and Safe Haven relinquishment — and establish a plan to fit their needs. Since the partnership began, there have been 62 calls from Louisiana made to the NSHA.
- One Church, One Family, One Child** - Working with the First Lady, the department increased its outreach to the faith-based community through this Louisiana Fosters initiative.
- Kinship Navigator Grant/Partnership with LA 211** - The goals of the Kinship Navigator Program are to provide supports needed by relative caregivers to meet the needs of relative children, to safely keep children in the relative's home, to maintain connections with birth parents and/or other birth family members, to prevent entry into the foster care system, and support the child's overall wellbeing. The LA 211 Partnership provides 24/7 toll-free access to resource and assistance information statewide through LA 211 phone or text access. Callers can request information or assistance in their community to help them meet the needs of their relative children for whom they are providing care. For SFY 2022, there were 5,650 referrals from the program. For SFY 2023, there were 4,000 referrals (as of April 30, 2023).

Disability Determination

- DDS participated in the piloting of Social Security Administration's IMAGEN software. IMAGEN is an Artificial Intelligence program to assist in the processing of disability claims.

Economic Stability

- DCFS implemented **Broad-based Categorical Eligibility** on April 15, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to use the State Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) resource eligibility rule of excluding resources (i.e., stocks, bonds, cash, certificates of deposit, and bank accounts) from eligibility consideration and enabled a greater number of households to be eligible for SNAP assistance.
- The agency partnered with the Louisiana Department of Education to offer the first Pandemic EBT benefits for children on free or reduced price meals who were out of school due to COVID-19-related closures. Issued \$505.39 million in benefits the first year.

- The department conducted a **virtual DSNAP** in response to Hurricane Laura at the height of the pandemic. This **was the first virtual wide-scale DSNAP in the nation**. Partnering with our call center, Young Williams, our EBT vendor, Inmar, our LITE and DSNAP system developer, Deloitte, and OTS, DCFS created a plan that was approved by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service(FNS) for the first large scale virtual DSNAP in the nation's history. By leveraging our current call center contract, we were able to route calls to eligibility workers statewide to take applications over the telephone. OTS worked with the Office of Motor Vehicles to have the DSNAP system interface with both the LA Wallet app and the OMV driver's license for Louisianans for identity verification. OTS also worked with Deloitte to create a nightly batch process to send notices out to clients for every DSNAP application, both those approved and those denied. The EBT vendor and Deloitte worked together to create a process to mail out EBT cards which had only ever been given out in person. Teams of 25-30 eligibility workers were created and added to the Interaction Connect system through Young Williams to take calls. A team lead, team monitor, team time administrator, Quality Assurance staff, and Policy Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) were added to each team. A team to process EBT cards and another team to handle secure encrypted emails were also created. Hurricane Delta hit the LA coast five weeks later following roughly the same path Hurricane Laura took and once again, we were able to conduct another virtual DSNAP. Hurricane Zeta hit before the end of hurricane season and in early 2021 LA was hit by both a winter snow storm and devastating flooding. In all, between August 2020 and May 2021, LA conducted five virtual DSNAPs. In September 2021, Hurricane Ida hit the coast of Louisiana near Thibodaux and three major metropolitan areas were declared disaster areas. Hurricane Ida became the largest virtual DSNAP ever conducted.

Workforce Development

- The department partnered with **Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) for SNAP Employment and Training**. The LCTCS effort focused initially on allied health and construction programs at Baton Rouge Community College and SOWELA Technical Community College in Lake Charles. The partnership allowed LCTCS to leverage federal reimbursement for certain SNAP recipient-related expenses to fill gaps for those students – paying for credentials and other supportive services, such as transportation, dependent care, uniforms, equipment, books, supplies and tools.

Legislation Successfully Passed

Act 177	Rep. Johnson	Revised the basic child support guidelines.
Act 266	Rep. LaCombe	Provided that the execution of a three-party acknowledgment terminates the obligation to pay child support by the husband or former husband.
Act 39	Sen. McMath	Revised the laws regarding evidence from criminalistics laboratories in noncriminal juvenile court proceedings.
Act 69	Rep. Hughes	Provided a limited authorization for DCFS to obtain copies of birth and death certificates of certain children and adults.
HCR 149	Rep. Turner	Revised contempt proceedings when DCFS provides child support enforcement services.

2021

Child Support

- **Child Support Responsible Parenting Program grant** – The Department's Child Support Enforcement (CSE) Program received a \$998,778 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families for a new initiative to improve the overall achievement of the state's youth by educating them on the financial, legal and emotional responsibilities of parenthood. CSE's new Educate, Stimulate, Graduate Initiative (ESGI) is designed to help teens and young adults gain the knowledge, skills and access to resources likely to lead to success in their pursuit of life goals, economic mobility and responsible parenting. Partners Louisiana State University and Southern University New Orleans are to provide university students to serve as peer educators in eight week-long programs for teens on the benefits of delayed parenthood. Discussions include the challenges and hardships young parents face and the services provided by the Child Support Enforcement program. ESGI is collaborating with community-based organizations to reach youths who are already disconnected from education and provide ongoing support through the program.
- DCFS reduced issues related to duplicate child support orders for the same children by requiring parties to state whether the family is receiving child support services.

Child Welfare

- DCFS partnered with the Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE) to bring **Training for Adoption Competency (TAC)** to mental health professionals in Louisiana. The training is designed to increase the adoption competency of mental health professionals working with children who are adopted out of foster care or enter guardianship. Nine mental health professionals completed training in 2022, and 10 are currently enrolled.
- To meet the institutional requirements of the federal **Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA)** of 2018, DCFS developed a new level of care and implemented the evidence based prevention services Child First and Intercept statewide.
- Deputy Assistant Secretary for Child Welfare Workforce Development- In February of 2021, the department expanded resources to develop a **Workforce Development Division** focused on internal employee Recruitment, Learning and Development, Employee Wellness, and Retention. The Child Welfare Workforce Development Unit has staff in Interview and Selection, Training, On-The-Job Training, Practice Enhancement programs, and Employee support.

Disability Determination

- DDS partnered with the Arkansas Extended Service Team to pilot Associated User Functionality in the new **Disability Case Processing System (DCPS)**. This involved the Louisiana DDS adding multiple users from other offices to assist with the growing workloads in Louisiana. The Louisiana DDS also implemented and piloted Microsoft Teams to be utilized for Disability Hearings. This video platform allowed claimants to participate in hearings remotely, a significant improvement in customer service, particularly during the pandemic. The Louisiana DDS also assisted the state of Texas with 6,000 medical reviews, and still, DDS met all production goals and maintained accuracy above the national average.

Department-Wide

- **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging** Initiative Begins - In 2021, DCFS hired a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Director and launched an initiative that led to the formation of the development of the DEIB Unit in 2021 and the creation of an internal DEIB Council in 2022. The DEIB Council offers another avenue for staff to express concerns and connect with DCFS leadership. In an ongoing effort to improve workplace climate, DCFS is working with LSU's School of Leadership and Human Resource Development to implement research-based practices that incorporate employee voice.
- Project and Portfolio Management Office Developed - First Agile group established within the Division of Management and Finance to support the LITE System.

Economic Stability

- DCFS transitioned to a new SNAP benefits schedule, with the goal of distributing benefits more evenly throughout each month. Rather than receiving benefits during the 1st through 14th of each month, SNAP households began receiving them between the 1st and 23rd of each month.

Legislation Successfully Passed

Act 351	Sen. Barrow	Foster Youth Bill of Rights. Establishes the legal rights of youth, age 14 to 18 in foster care, to participate in their cases, get what they need to attend school and participate in extracurricular activities and the Independent Living Skills Program, among other opportunities. The Foster Youth Bill of Rights was developed by Louisiana's state youth advisory board known as Louisiana Elite Advocacy Force (LEAF), in partnership with DCFS.
Act 119	Rep. Zeringue	Included an increase in foster care board rate and adoption subsidies for the first time since 2007. The rate increased by approximately 25%.
Act 367	Rep. Stagni	Amended the definition of "caretaker" in laws pertaining to child in need of care (CINC) proceedings.
Act 31	Rep. Hughes	Clarified laws regarding violations by facilities licensed under the Specialized Provider Licensing Act.
Act 11	Rep. Johnson	Established DCFS as an indispensable party in any proceeding concerning paternity or child support obligations when DCFS is providing child support services on behalf of a child involved in the proceeding.
Act 209	Sen. Tarver	Repealed the requirement for DCFS to provide workers' compensation and liability insurance coverage for participants engaged in work experience or community service activities.
Act 339	Rep. Carter	Revised the law regarding the reduction of child support during the obligor's incarceration.

Child Welfare

The Child Welfare Division pursued the following Seven Strategies to Stabilize the Child Welfare System:

- Recruit, retain and support staff and foster caregivers
- Ensure coordinated multi-disciplinary response with key system partners
- Prioritize assessment and services for high-risk infants and toddlers
- Coordinate assessment and referrals with Managed Care Organizations and/or university medical programs
- Enhance training and coaching of staff
- Improve safety decision-making/provide intensive oversight of complex cases
- Enhance research and monitoring of critical incidents

DCFS created the **Foster Caregiver Advisory Board** as a platform for certified foster caregivers to partner with the department to improve communication, policy and practice. The department began accepting nominations for the board in February 2022 and received 95 applications from individuals interested in serving and more than 70 additional recommendations. In July 2022, nine members joined the board, each tasked with providing much-needed feedback from the perspectives of certified foster parents and relative caregivers. Board members serve a one- or two-year term and represent the diversity of the foster families served by the department. The board includes three subcommittees: Communication, Policy, and Support and Training.

DCFS Child Welfare Special Entrance Rate. Child Welfare implemented a Special Entrance Rate (SER) for all Child Welfare Specialists and Social Service Analysts as an effort to competitively recruit and retain employees.

Disability Determination

DDS exceeded all production goals and was above the national average for quality despite also heavily assisting DSNAP for 6 weeks. The Louisiana DDS was the first agency in the nation to present its telework plan to the SSA for approval. DDS also partnered with SSA IT personnel to improve and streamline the payment and invoicing process for our Medical Consultants. DDS also assisted both Texas and Arkansas with over 20,000 medical reviews.

Legislation Successfully Passed

Act 141	Rep. Bagley	Recreated DCFS and established a new sunset date for the agency.
----------------	-------------	--

Department-Wide

Statewide Employee Assistance Program - **The Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** was a pilot program initiated in Child Welfare as a Workforce Development Employee Wellness initiative in November 2022. The EAP Program grew to become the first department-wide family-centered program, supporting mental health and emotional wellness of all DCFS employees and their families on May 1, 2023.

Cooperative Endeavor Agreement with LA 211 Statewide Network – DCFS signed a cooperative endeavor agreement with Louisiana Association of United Ways, which provided access to the Louisiana 211 Statewide Network and a closed loop platform, Unite Us. Using a No Wrong Door concept, a closed loop platform helps DCFS programs better assist clients and create referral pathways with vendors.

Economic Stability

Expanded the Broad Based Categorical Eligibility guidelines implemented in 2020 by increasing the SNAP income threshold from 130 percent to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). The increase to 200 percent of FPL assists households in avoiding the "benefits cliff" as families' wages increase, whereas a minor rise in earnings under the standard 130 percent FPL might result in a loss of SNAP benefits for families.

Doubled benefits provided through the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The monthly benefit amount for a three-person household under the Family Independence Temporary Assistance Program (FITAP) increased from \$240 to the national average of \$484, while the monthly benefit amount for eligible children under the Kinship Care Subsidy Program (KCSP) increased from \$222 to \$450. This moved Louisiana from 48th in the nation to the national average. The number of households receiving Family Independence Temporary Assistance Program (FITAP) benefits has increased 76.2 percent (January 2022 to May 2023), from 1,555 households to 2,740, and the number of workforce participants tied to the program has increased from 898 in January 2022 to 2,002 in May 2023.

SNAP online grocery purchases began in March 2022. Walmart was the first to make the service available, but as of August 2023, 11 additional retailers have joined the program: Albertsons, Amazon, Brookshire's Food and Pharmacy, Butcher Boy, Mac's Super Market of Jena, River Queen Greens, Sam's Club Scan and Go, Spring Market, Sprouts Farmers Market, Super 1 Foods Brookshires, and Whole Foods.

Expanded Support for Victims of Domestic Violence - The state allocated an additional \$1 million to open two emergency shelters in areas where there had been none – one in Iberia and another in Avoyelles.

Child Welfare

My Community Cares Expansion - **My Community Cares (MCC)** has expanded to one local MCC agency in each region of the state, situated in the parish with the highest occurrence of abuse, neglect, and out-of-home placement of children. The MCC expansion across the state includes a more structured approach to primary prevention and community engagement, supported by an MCC State Team.

Juvenile Sex Trafficking Hotline - Act 662 of the 2022 Legislative Session established that DCFS take all reports regarding child sex trafficking, regardless of parental or caretaker culpability, and send to Louisiana State Police for referral to the appropriate local law enforcement agency for investigation or other action as appropriate. The law also required the department to make Care Coordination and Advocacy services available for child victims of sex trafficking within the state. The hotline went live January 1, 2023.

Child Support

DCFS repealed the mandatory minimum child support amount - This repeal ensures that child support orders are based on the actual income and circumstances of the noncustodial parent, rather than a fixed minimum amount. This change allows for more flexibility and fairness in determining child support obligations.

Department-Wide

The DCFS Employee Assistance Program grew to become the first department-wide family-centered program, supporting mental health and emotional wellness of all DCFS employees and their families.

Legislation Successfully Passed

Act 24	Rep. Carpenter	Eliminated the minimum child support award in the state's child support guidelines to comply with federal law.
---------------	----------------	--

Economic Stability

- DCFS implemented a standard medical deduction for SNAP. Under this change, individuals over 60 or with disabilities who have health expenses exceeding \$35 (but less than \$196) are able to claim a medical deduction of \$161. This decreases the net income they report as part of their SNAP calculation, ultimately increasing their SNAP benefits.
- SNAP Mobile Payment Pilot. The USDA Food and Nutrition Service selected DCFS as one of five states to test mobile payment technology for EBT cardholders in the next few years. The SNAP Mobile Payment Pilot will allow recipients of SNAP and other EBT benefits to use mobile payment methods - like tapping or scanning their personal mobile device - as an alternative to their physical EBT card. This will give them immediate access to their benefits when approved and issued, eliminating any delay resulting from waiting for a mailed card.
- **Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP)**. The USDA FNS selected DCFS for a demonstration project that allows households where all adults are age 60 or older or disabled and have no earned income to be certified for SNAP for 36 months instead of 24 months. These households are not required to submit an annual Simplified Report and do not have to be interviewed at redetermination. The ESAP was implemented on July 1, 2023.
- Prisoner Re-Entry Program. In January 2023 we implemented the prisoner re-entry program to allow incarcerated individuals to apply for SNAP up to 30 days prior to their release date.

Successful partnerships with non-profits, the federal government and other states

- **Connecting families with resources and benefits in their communities and statewide.**

DCFS signed a cooperative endeavor agreement in January 2022 with Louisiana Association of United Ways to establish a Louisiana 211 Statewide Network partnership in service for Louisiana residents to find resources and help in their neighborhoods and statewide. Louisiana 211 has answered the call -- for shelter, disaster food assistance, housing, health care and more. From the time this partnership launched on January 1, 2022, until June 12, 2023, more than 115,000 Louisiana residents have received help to meet 130,844 basic needs. To meet these needs Louisiana 211 provided 223,929 referrals to neighbors throughout Louisiana.

- **Family-Centered Child Support.**

In 2020, the DCFS Child Support Enforcement Unit received a grant from The Kresge Foundation to engage Public Knowledge, formerly Center for Support of Families, in guiding the agency's transition to family-centered services.

- **Workforce Development.**

There are several partnerships around DCFS's workforce employment and training efforts including Mathematica, Ochsner Health, LABI, Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) and United Way of Southeast Louisiana.

- **SNAP Outreach.**

Louisiana currently has a partnership with Vietnamese Initiatives in Economic Training (VIET), Feeding Louisiana, and UrbanFootprint to increase outreach efforts toward the elderly, students, veterans, immigrant communities, and all potentially eligible individuals who are not currently receiving SNAP. UrbanFootprint is working with DCFS to deploy data and tools to support the targeted distribution of benefits and to help identify high concentrations of underserved families and elderly.

- **Extended Foster Care.**

Youth Villages, a national nonprofit organization, awarded the state a three-year, \$3 million grant to expand services for youth transitioning out of foster care. DCFS was one of four agencies receiving matching grants to implement the LifeSet Case Management Model for the Extended Foster Care (EFC) Program. The department also worked with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to develop the program and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption on additional foster placement.

- **Data-driven Decision-making.**

The Blanco Public Policy Center at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette is key partner in multiple research and programmatic efforts increasing data-driven decision-making, including in the areas of workforce and staff development.

- **Addressing the benefits cliff.** DCFS partnered with the Atlanta Federal Reserve to create the Career Ladder Identifier and Financial Forecaster (CLIFF) tool, a product of the Resilient Louisiana Commission. It is specifically designed to assist STEP participants in addressing the benefits cliff that occurs when participants move from dependency on public benefits to self-sufficiency.

- **Child well-being.**

DCFS has worked with Casey Family Programs on a number of issues around child well-being, including My Community Cares and other community engagement projects that involve developing supportive services for families.

- **Child Welfare planning and extended foster care.**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private non-profit that has partnered with Louisiana in several capacities. The Foundation worked with the department staff early in the administration to improve utilization of data, engagement of clients and case planning to improve stability for children and youth in care. The Foundation also helped the department to implement its extended foster care program.

- **Adoption recruitment, including for Extended Foster Care.**

Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is a national nonprofit that has teamed with Louisiana on foster caregiver recruitment and implementation of the Extended Foster Care (EFC) program. The Department received a three-year, \$3 million grant from the Foundation's Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) Program to expand services for transition-age foster youth. Since 2016, WWK has helped 224 youth find their forever homes through adoption or guardianship.

- **Human-centered technology solutions.**

Code for America, a nonprofit focused on human-centered technology solutions that increase access to government services and programs, named DCFS the inaugural recipient of the Code for America's Government Changemaker Award in May 2023. The Government Changemaker Award recognizes an individual or group that has applied a digital solution to a government system that improves community access. Code for America highlighted the Department's use of text messages in helping more than 4,000 Louisianans claim more than \$4 million in valuable tax credits.

- The Department's collaboration with Code for America began in 2019 with the launch of the LAMessage pilot, a one-way text messaging service that broadcast notifications to benefit recipients at critical points throughout the enrollment and renewal process.

- Using the RAVE Alert platform by RAVE Mobile Safety, the Department sent nearly 80 million text messages from March 2020 through March 2023, reaching as many as 675,452 recipients at one time during the COVID-19 pandemic and through multiple hurricanes.

- Louisiana was among one of the first states selected in May 2022 to participate in Code for America's Safety Net Innovation Lab, through which the Department is working to improve its online benefits application portal and the SNAP benefits application process. As a result, the Department is working with Code for America on a document uploader, an expanded texting campaign and a digital assistant.

- **Child Support Suspensions and Modifications.** Child Support entered into a memorandum of understanding with Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections/Department of Corrections to share information with DOC to inform incarcerated parents who are ordered to pay child support of all information about their child support case. Information received from DOC can be used to suspend or modify the child support obligation during the parent's incarceration.



Challenges Met



Responding to Needs Presented by COVID-19, 2016 floods, Hurricanes and other disasters

DCFS responded to seven major disasters since January 2016, providing sheltering and evacuation assistance for the 2016 Floods (in North and South Louisiana) and hurricanes Harvey, Laura, Delta, Zeta and Ida, while also responding to sheltering needs presented by the COVID-19 Pandemic. On top of sheltering and evacuation assistance, the department conducted nine DSNAP operations for the 2016 floods, the four hurricanes with major Louisiana impacts (Laura, Delta, Zeta and Ida), as well as the 2017 tornado in New Orleans, the 2021 Winter Storm and the May flood of 2021.

- In a record for Louisiana emergency sheltering, DCFS coordinated sheltering for 18,213 hurricane evacuees over eight months in emergency non-congregate (hotel) shelters during Hurricane Laura -- from August 23, 2020 to April 28, 2021.
- DCFS staff managed shelter operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in response to the following major disasters: the North Louisiana and South Louisiana floods of 2016 and hurricanes Harvey, Laura, Delta, Zeta and Ida.
- DCFS staff dedicated 326,167 evacuation and sheltering hours and 581,619 DSNAP hours in response to these major disasters.
- The department contracted with LA 211 Statewide Network for texting and phone communication during disasters, providing a crucial link for residents seeking shelter, DSNAP and other disaster-related resources.

Responding to an Unprecedented Need for Assistance and Information

- Customer service and public information calls to the LAHelpU Customer Service Center more than doubled to more than 175,000 in April, June and September 2020, following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, P-EBT, and Hurricanes Laura and Delta, respectively.
- Emails for assistance to LAHelpU more than tripled, from 48,862 in 2019 to 152,275 in 2020.
- DCFS website users increased 300% between March and December 2020, compared to the same period in 2019, increasing from 3.8 million in 2019 to 15.2 million in 2020. Most of the increase was related to SNAP, DSNAP and P-EBT.

In 2021 alone, DCFS:

- Sent 30.1 million text messages about food benefits, emergency preparedness and response, foster care services, expanded tax credits, system outages, new programs and offerings.
- Responded to 1.73 million calls and emails to the LAHelpU Customer Service Center.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Responded to a record demand for SNAP

- DCFS received more than 150,000 SNAP applications in the first 30 days after schools closed on March 16, 2020, roughly 5 times the typical amount. (In the 6 months prior to March 2020, monthly SNAP applications averaged 31,090.)
 - As a result, the department added more than 109,000 SNAP households between January 2020 and January 2021, an increase of 23 percent.
 - The department served a record 477,227 households (981,751 individuals) in January 2021.
 - Monthly SNAP payments more than doubled to \$206.3 million, an increase of 112.7 percent, between January 2020 and January 2021
- To serve the extraordinary need, the department took advantage of additional food assistance made available through passage of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.
 - SNAP Emergency Allotments – provided households with the maximum benefits for the household size. DCFS ultimately issued the benefits for three years until the funding was discontinued as a result of Congressional action.
 - DCFS distributed \$2.2 billion in extra SNAP COVID-19 emergency allotments distributed (extra benefits) during the pandemic.
 - Pandemic EBT – provided food assistance for K-12 students who were eligible for free- or reduced-price meals and who were impacted by school closures or reduced hours because of COVID. The program eventually expanded to include children age 0-6 from SNAP households whose childcare centers closed or operated in reduced hours because of COVID.
 - The department developed an interactive online Parent Portal to help parents manage their children's P-EBT benefits.
 - \$1.3 billion in Pandemic EBT was issued to 5,711,997 children on free or reduced price school meals, as of August 10, 2023

Managing Sheltering During the Pandemic

- Working with partners, Louisiana opened four isolation shelters, three of which were in Louisiana State Parks in the northern, central and southern regions of the state. These trailers provide isolation for COVID positive and presumptive positive residents. The 37 cabins within the three parks were also used. The other site was a Medical Monitoring Station and Annex located at the Morial Convention Center in New Orleans.
 - 1,105 – Total number of Isolation Site Patients
 - 91 – Peak Isolation Site Population
 - 66,644 hours worked by 109 DCFS staff members

Child Support

- Child Support Order Modifications. To respond to the loss of income and changes in employment of Louisiana residents, DCFS introduced a new page on its website to provide instructions for modifying child support orders. The page included a new video to explain the child support process.

Child Welfare

The department introduced new protocols to adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as:

- Working with judges and Louisiana Court Improvement program to determine court protocols for hearings on child safety and permanency
- Implementing a protocol for staff communication with foster parents at least weekly to meet the needs of foster children
- Providing training and the means to ensure that families and youth remained connected through the pandemic, including providing cell phones to youth.
 - DCFS has continued these initiatives after the pandemic, as they have been beneficial in strengthening communication channels and ensuring families remain connected.

DCFS provided training and emotional support to staff and foster parents to navigate the challenges presented by the pandemic. To provide this support, DCFS:

- Created a 24/7 hotline for foster parents
- Created 24/7 Practice Support Teams to provide staff with guidance on cases involving family members impacted by COVID-19
- Converted orientations and required trainings to online/virtual platforms to ensure ongoing training for newly hired staff and certification and support for foster caregivers
- Created a dedicated webpage for foster caregivers to obtain the latest information and guidance related to the pandemic
- Provided educational support and guidance for foster children entering the 2020-21 school year, such as reimbursement for PPE for in-person classes and in choosing the best possible educational option for children, including the availability of tutoring services for foster children.
- There was an effort to help eligible foster children get vaccinated against COVID-19.
- Virtual Adoption Events 2020-2021 (adoption hearings, as well as our annual celebrations)

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many adoption hearings and the Annual Adoption Celebration were held virtually in 2020. The Department and First Lady Donna Edwards recognized the resilience of the families in meeting the challenges to the adoption process brought on by the pandemic lockdown. Despite the pandemic and series of hurricanes, there were still 756 adoptions finalized in FFY2020, the fourth highest number in a single year. More than 125 of those adoptions happened completely virtually, and countless others were partially virtual, with the adoptive family and attorneys present in court while extended family and friends participated by Zoom.
- The 23rd Annual Adoption Celebration in 2021 was also held virtually due to the pandemic. In FFY 2021, 470 families adopted 612 children and youth from foster care. Twenty of the 2021 adoptions were completed with the help of Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters, specialized adoption workers assigned to take on some of the most challenging and complex cases, through a partnership with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

03

Food Assistance (Disaster SNAP and Replacement SNAP benefits)

- Virtual DSNAP – Because of COVID restrictions, DCFS operated the first wide-scale virtual DSNAP in the nation in response to Hurricane Laura, followed by Hurricanes Delta, Zeta and Ida.
 - Hurricane Laura: \$38M issued to 56,338 households
 - Hurricane Delta: \$4.18M issued to 10,832 households
 - Hurricane Zeta: \$9.6M issued to 26,803 households
 - Hurricane Ida: \$67.5M issued to 154,224 households

2016 Floods

In 2016, DCFS responded to two major flooding events, impacting most Louisiana parishes.

- Sheltered 12,403 peak residents in state, American Red Cross, parish and community-based shelters (most during the August flood, in which 11,669 were sheltered)
- Half of DCFS staff were reassigned to disaster response during major incidents in 2016
 - 429,334 total staff hours were devoted to emergency operations (sheltering and Disaster SNAP for both flood events)
- Issued \$184,033,467 in disaster food assistance after the March and August floods.
 - 63 DSNAP sites total in 50 parishes, some flooded in both events (37 DSNAP sites across 35 parishes in March; 26 sites across 21 parishes in August)

March 2016 Flood

- 48 shelters opened and managed by parishes and the American Red Cross
- 734 residents were sheltered at the peak of the storm.
- 37 DSNAP Sites across 35 Parishes (3 Phases)
- 152,461 hours worked by 1,128 DCFS staff members during DSNAP

August 2016 Flood

- 85 shelters opened across 16 parishes
 - At the peak, 11,669 residents were sheltered in state, ARC, parish and community-based shelters
 - 57,965 hours worked by more than 300 DCFS staff members in shelter
- There were 26 DSNAP sites across 21 parishes - (3 Phases)
- 218,908 hours worked by 1,310 DCFS staff members
- Child Welfare staff verified the whereabouts of 1,666 foster children in 21 disaster parishes after the August flood. This amounted to 38 percent of Louisiana's foster children at that time.

- Issued \$51.6M in SNAP replacement benefits to 331,412 households for loss of food purchased with SNAP due to power outages of 24 hours or more.
 - Hurricane Laura: \$26.78M in replacement benefits issued to 101,768 households
 - Hurricane Delta: \$15.2M in replacement benefits issued to 122,556 households
 - Hurricane Zeta: \$9.6M in replacement benefits issued to 101,768 households
 - Hurricane Ida: \$50.6M in replacement benefits issued to 196,987 households

Hurricanes

Hurricane Harvey - August to September 2017

- 17 shelters opened
- Supported 1,928 Texas residents in two state Critical Transportation Needs Shelters
- At the peak of the operation, there were 2,142 Louisiana and Texas residents sheltered.
 - 231 DCFS staff members worked 14,308 hours in the shelter

Hurricane Laura, Delta, Zeta - 2020

- Three hurricanes, including Category 4 Laura, added to the Emergency Response work in 2020.
- 173,000 hours worked by DCFS staff members
 - Hurricane Laura
 - 18,213 residents sheltered in 78 Shelters
 - 58 Non-Congregate shelters
 - 20 Congregate shelters
 - Hurricane Delta
 - 1,047 residents sheltered in 15 shelters
 - 2 Non-Congregate shelters
 - 13 Congregate shelters
 - Hurricane Zeta
 - 77 residents sheltered in 15 shelters
 - 1 Non-Congregate shelters
 - 14 Congregate shelters

Hurricane Ida - 2021

- 76,419 hours worked by DCFS staff members
 - 3,560 residents sheltered in 88 Shelters

Leaving Louisiana Better Than We Found It

DCFS Reorganization.

The DCFS Reorganization Bill was the first bill brought by the department in 2016. It means the department staff and its programs are now aligned along areas of expertise and bodies of work and better able to serve the public.

Extended foster care to age 21.

In 2018, Governor Edwards signed a law extending the age of foster care from 18 to 21, and DCFS implemented the new Extended Foster Care (EFC) program. The program is voluntary for youth 18-21 and is designed to help youth develop independent living skills and achieve success through adulthood.

Increase in Foster Care Board Rates, Adoption and Guardianship Subsidies.

In 2021, for the first time in more than a decade, Louisiana's foster caregivers received an increase in the monthly board rate that provides financial support for the care of children and youth in the State's custody. The rate increased by about 25 percent. The increase in board rates also meant an increase in adoption and guardianship subsidies, which are paid at 80 percent of the current foster care board rate for eligible families.

Workforce Development.

Creation of the workforce unit and expansion of workforce programs (STEP, SNAP E&T and CSE E&T)

Digital Investments.

Increased public access to programs and benefits through digital means and human-centered design

Virtual Processes.

Better prepared for non-congregate needs, as a result of work done during the pandemic. Examples include Virtual DSNAP, SNAP Online Grocery Purchasing, a vast and growing system of communicating with those we serve through digital means, etc.

More avenues to pay child support and request a review of child support orders when situations change.

Investment in assistance for Domestic Violence has increased from \$6 million a year 2016-2020 to \$7million in 2021 to \$8 million in 2022, adding services at two new shelters, funded by Family Violence (FVPSA) and TANF funds.

Stabilizing the DCFS Workforce.

Staffing has continued to be the highest area of concern for the Department, which suffered a net-loss of 1,500 staff between 2008 and 2015. Since 2016, the number of authorized T.O. positions has increased 10 percent, from 3,409 in SFY 2016 to 3,737 in SFY 2024.

- The Department has worked closely with the Division of Administration and Civil Service to open new categories, job titles and avenues for workers to advance and to address some of the staffing concerns.
- As a result of targeted pulse surveys, we have begun to put in place a mentorship program, Process Improvement Efficiency Committee, a Lean Six Sigma training program and revised exit and stay interviews. We also conducted administrative reviews, increased salaries, provided employee supportive services, and facilitated statewide training forums.
- DCFS also teamed with State Civil Service and Louisiana Workforce Commission to hold 14 hiring fairs statewide since September 2022, which resulted in an increase in the department's full-time equivalent by 417 people. Most notably, new hires outpaced staff separations since July 1, 2022, by 60 percent, marking welcome progress in staff retention.

DCFS Offices.

After significant offices closures and consolidations, DCFS physical office locations have increased slightly from 57 in 2016 to 61 today. The loss of offices still offers challenges to the agency in service to children and families.

Project and Portfolio Management.

DCFS developed and implemented a Lean Agile Project Portfolio Management Office (PPMO) to improve the quantity and quality of support for computer system changes, as well as support for other administrative support functions. The team is playing a key role in projects to replace DCFS's three-decades-old Child Support and Child Welfare computer systems.

Website and digital communication enhancements:

Since 2016, DCFS has upgraded its website (<http://www.dcfslouisiana.gov/>) and made a number of other digital enhancements designed to increase transparency and public access to services:

- Increased the use of direct communication with benefit recipients, foster parents and staff through texting, email and other means.
- Launched an online Public Records Portal (2019).
- Increased website accessibility functionality for individuals with disabilities and visitors requiring language translation.
- Added a ChatBot to the website to answer questions and provide information about recipient benefits and services.
- Increased frequently-asked questions and drop-down menus.

The Louisiana Child Welfare Training Academy (LCWTA)

strategic partnership greatly expanded its reach and investment in child welfare in Louisiana since 2016. Partners include DCFS, Grambling, LSU, Nicholls, Northwestern, Southeastern, Southern University-Baton Rouge, Southern University – New Orleans, University of Louisiana-Monroe, and the Pelican Center for Children and Families. Since 2016, the partnership has more than tripled the resources available to support strategic investments in child welfare in Louisiana. The partnership is also reaching beyond Louisiana. It hosted the National Title IVE Roundtable in the state for the first time in May 2023.

- Through the partnership since 2019, approximately 40 DCFS child welfare professionals have completed their Masters in Social Work along with another 19 DCFS child welfare professionals currently enrolled and progressing through the program.
- Updated systems with human-centered design principles:
 - Louisiana Integrated Technology for Eligibility (LITE) system – Focused on Economic Stability programs that include SNAP, FITAP, KCSP, STEP and DSNAP. This program is designed to make it easier for DCFS staff to do their jobs more effectively and efficiently.
 - CAFÉ Self-Service Portal – Focused on user-centered redesign, in collaboration with the Office of Technology Services and Code for America, the aim is to make the portal more user-friendly and mobile responsive for benefits recipients.
 - PowerDMS, an online public portal for DCFS policies.
 - New Evacuee Tracking System, that utilizes Apple Products that has improve process
 - New Shelter Management system, linked through WebEoc. It provides shelter management information from the shelter level to the Governor's dashboard.

Additional emergency shelter space.

DCFS worked with the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and

Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP) and other state agencies to build additional Mega Shelters along with smaller shelters in parishes for the future. This process begins with the building of another Mega Shelter on Southern University's northern campus in Baton Rouge that will hold an additional 2,000+ evacuees. There are also plans to build two additional shelters, one in the North Shore area and another in the western part of the state. Plans are well on their way, with Baton Rouge's shelter scheduled to start construction by the end of 2023.

Child Support Enforcement Modernization Project (CSEMP)

The planning phase began in July 2021 for the Child Support Enforcement Modernization Project (CSEMP). The planned system aims to provide a modernized, reliable, seamless, and consistent application experience and data exchange model for various stakeholders involved in child support, including staff from Child Support, District Attorneys, courts, private attorneys, vendors, as well as custodial and non-custodial parents. Its purpose is to assist these stakeholders in navigating the processes related to applying for child support and managing case requirements. The primary objective of the modern system is to efficiently handle court-ordered child support obligations and ensure accurate, consistent, and timely disbursement of payments to custodial parents or guardians. The project has secured federal funding for the Design, Development, and Implementation (DDI) phase, which is approved until September 2026.

Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS)

The Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) is a modular, reusable case management information framework and set of standards that states and tribes may develop to support their unique child welfare program needs. The goal of the system is to provide child welfare staff with information to make informed decisions and take action; encourage program innovation; support collaboration with other human service, health, and education programs/systems; facilitate communication with courts; promote continuous quality improvement; use new technology to support the child welfare team; and reduce costs for development and maintenance.





Stories of Our Success

05

Shanna's Success Story

Meet Shanna Wynn, a dedicated Strategies to Empower People (STEP) Program Coach hailing from the Thibodaux Region. In the heart of her story lies the essence of STEP's mission – to pave a pathway to self-sufficiency for work-eligible families benefiting from FITAP, empowering them with opportunities for job training, employment, and comprehensive support services.

"My name is Shanna Wynn. Let me begin by saying that where I am now in life is very different from where I was 14 months ago. I was first introduced to the STEP program as a participant. And let me tell you, I was far from sure where my life would be now. About fourteen months ago, I experienced extreme hardship and could not meet my basic needs. I made a choice to pick up my children and move back to my home state of Louisiana."

"Upon moving back to Louisiana, I was introduced to STEP Coaches and, using the tools they provided, I started making goals for my family. With each goal I made, my coaches were there to cheer me on, encourage me, and help me become the best version of myself. With the encouragement from my coach, I applied for the STEP Coach position at DCFS. She saw something in me and knew I was made for this position."

"Long story short, I enrolled in an online Medical Billing and Coding program at Ultimate Medical Academy in Tampa, Florida, and fourteen months later, I am a college graduate. While working full time as a STEP Coach and being a full-time single mom, I still managed to earn High Honors with a 4.0 GPA and become a member of the Alpha Beta Kappa Honor Society. I regularly share my story of success with STEP participants to encourage them to set goals and have dreams. There is never a dream too big or small if you set your mind to the end result you want."

"Shanna is committed to helping our participants because she has been in their shoes," said Lisa Deroche, STEP Coach. "She understands the participants' circumstances and is very innovative at finding resources to assist them in any way possible. In addition to this, she also opens the door to talk about her life experiences to encourage the participants to share more of their stories with her. This enables her to find different avenues to assist them in their own journey within the STEP program. Although she now has a degree in a completely different field than STEP, she remains committed to helping our participants and has stated to me several times that she is not going anywhere because she knows she was called to do this work!"

Extended Foster Care—Angelina

My name is Angelina Gallwey, and I am a participant of Louisiana's Extended Foster Care (EFC) Program for youth ages 18 to 21. EFC is a voluntary support and social work-based program to assist youth as they age out of foster care. They can choose to be part of EFC when they turn 18.

I went into foster care at 16, and my Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) knew that I would be a potential candidate for EFC so she got the information from DCFS. I signed the paperwork a few weeks after I turned 18 and have been in EFC since. Getting support from the state of Louisiana and my community has changed my life for the better.

Being part of extended foster care in Louisiana has opened so many doors for me and taught me many lessons. I have been able to enroll and excel in college. I often speak about my experiences and choosing to heal, which is only possible because of EFC. Having a support system that truly has your best interest at heart removes the feeling of helplessness many foster youths come to know. I am currently also a member of LEAF, or Louisiana Elite Advocacy Force, to advocate and amplify voices for other youth. I sadly age out next year, but I am so glad I made the choice to put me first and joined extended foster care.

BY THE NUMBERS

06

In a single year, DCFS serves about 1 in 4 Louisiana residents with child welfare, food assistance and child support services. During the pandemic and successive disasters, the number of children and families served increased considerably, to almost 1 in 3.

Division of Child Welfare Response (January 1, 2016 through May 31, 2023)

Foster Care

- As 25,115 children served through Foster Care
- 14,578 children reunited with family
- 6,073 newly certified foster homes

Extended Foster Care

- 517 youth served in extended foster care from January 1, 2016 through May 31, 2023.

Adoption from foster care (January 1, 2016 through May 31, 2023)

- 5,600 foster children adopted
 - Includes three record years of adoptions, led by 2018, when 912 children were adopted by 631 families.
 - In that year, DCFS also saw an increase in the number of families adopting siblings and a 30.8 percent increase in the number of teens (ages 13-17) adopted from foster care, two key indicators of success.
- First adult adoption out of the Extended Foster Care Program in 2021 and three more in 2022.

Home-based services for children and their families (January 1, 2016 through May 31, 2023)

- 16,948 families served
- 37,430 children served

1,505 new Child Welfare workers trained from October 1, 2016 through June 15, 2023

- Child Welfare employees must complete 64 hours of training in the first year to prepare them for their roles as Child Welfare professionals

Since 2016, Wendy's Wonderful Kids has helped 224 youth find their forever homes through adoption or guardianship.

Division of Family Support Response (January 1, 2016 through May 31, 2023)

Food Assistance since 2016

- More than \$14.6 Billion in food assistance to about one in three Louisianans
- Includes \$10.8 billion in SNAP benefits to 866,470 individuals from January 2016 to May 2023.
- \$22.5 Billion economic impact to the state
- 209,288 unique retailers supported by SNAP
- Almost 1 Million SNAP benefits were issued in January 2021, a record

DCFS conducted 9 DSNAP operations, with \$283 Million in DSNAP benefits issued.

- March 2016 floods
- August 2016 floods
- NOLA tornado (2017)
- Hurricane Laura (2020)
- Hurricane Delta (2020)
- Hurricane Zeta (2020)
- Winter Storms (2021)
- May flood (2021)
- Hurricane Ida (2021)

An estimated \$3 Million was saved by operating DSNAP virtually, versus on site for the 2020 hurricanes.

\$1.3 Billion in Pandemic EBT was issued to 5,711,997 children on free or reduced price school meals, as of 8/10/23

Child Support

DCFS collected more than \$3.2 Billion in child support for approximately 2 million children since 2016.

Disability Determination

176,758 adults and 68,029 children served with Disability Determination Services

Kinship Care

314,788 children received \$81,572,653 in Kinship Care subsidies

LA 211

Since the LA 211 partnership launched on January 1, 2022, **183,234 Louisiana residents** have received help to meet **212,984 basic needs**.

- To meet these needs Louisiana 211 provided **359,704 referrals** to neighbors throughout our state

Emergency Preparedness

Between January 2016 and August 2023, DCFS responded to 7 major disasters while also responding to sheltering needs presented by the COVID-19 Pandemic and a number of smaller tropical storms, winter storms and other weather and man-made events.

- In a record, DCFS staff coordinated sheltering for 18,213 Hurricane Laura evacuees over 8 months in emergency non-congregate (hotel) shelters -- from August 23, 2020 to April 28, 2021.
- Staff dedicated 326,167 in evacuation and sheltering hours and 581,619 in DSNAP hours in response to these major disasters.

Customer Service and Public information, 2020-2023

- DCFS sent 80 million text messages to SNAP and DSNAP recipients throughout the three years of the pandemic.
- Calls to the LAHelpU Customer Service Center more than doubled to 175,000+ in April, June and September 2020, following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, P-EBT, and Hurricanes Laura and Delta, respectively.
- Emails for assistance to LAHelpU more than tripled, from 48,862 in 2019 to 152,275 in 2020.
- DCFS website users increased 300 percent between March and December 2020, compared to the same period in 2019, increasing from 3.8 million in 2019 to 15.2 million in 2020. Most of the increase was related to SNAP, DSNAP and P-EBT. The increase held throughout the three years of the pandemic.

In 2021 alone, DCFS:

- Sent 30.1 Million text messages about food benefits, emergency preparedness and response, foster care services, expanded tax credits, system outages, new programs and offerings.
- Responded to 1.73 Million calls and emails to the LAHelpU Customer Service Center.

Social media growth and engagement

Over the span of five years, the DCFS website achieved an impressive 96.5 percent surge in page views, with visitor engagement almost doubling from 11,702,671 in 2016 to a peak in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic of 22,998,274.

Noteworthy metrics since January 1, 2016:

- Total website users: 26,083,239
- Total webpage views: 96,269,455
- Platform distribution: 71 percent accessed via mobile, 26 percent via desktop, and 3 percent used tablets.
- Gender breakdown: Since January 1, 2016, female users accounted for 66 percent of visitors, while male users constituted 33 percent.

Significant growth in DCFS social media users:

- When the Communications Office began expanding its staff at the beginning of 2017, the DCFS Facebook page was followed by under 3,000 users. In 2021, the Facebook following exceeded 47,000, with a reach of 1.35 Million as of October 9, 2022. As of August 13, 2023, the DCFS Facebook page showcases a cumulative lifetime reach of 9.9 Million, accompanied by a remarkable 15 Million impressions. The page has a community of 48,754 active followers.
- In recent years, the department has notably intensified its utilization of paid advertisements, a trend clearly exemplified by the substantial uptick in ad impressions, with the DCFS Facebook account now achieving a remarkable 1,347,357 impressions and an expanded reach of 2,835,764 users.
- DCFS has further developed its Twitter presence, using it as a channel for agency program news, consistently generating over 18,000 impressions (number of times a tweet was seen) per month. The agency has also increased its use of YouTube, Instagram and LinkedIn.



Office of the Governor
JOHN BEL EDWARDS
2016–2024