



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**OFFICIAL STATEMENT FROM UNION REPRESENTING L.A. COUNTY CHILDREN'S
SOCIAL WORKERS ON JUDGE'S DECISION TO ALLOW A CRIMINAL TRIAL
FOR L.A. COUNTY SOCIAL WORKERS INVOLVED IN THE GABRIEL FERNANDEZ CASE**

LOS ANGELES, Calif. — L.A. County children's social workers were devastated by the death of Gabriel Fernandez, who was abused and murdered by his parents while in the L.A. County DCFS child welfare system.

L.A. County children's social workers wrestle with heavy caseloads, endless paperwork and a host of other systemic challenges that make an already emotionally taxing job a daily struggle. That's why children's social workers were outraged by District Attorney Jackie Lacey's decision to pursue criminal indictment of social workers in relation to the death of Gabriel Fernandez. We are saddened by the Court's decision to allow a criminal trial to proceed.

Criminalizing social workers will do nothing to address the real systemic problems that lead to Gabriel's death and will put even more children at risk. This trial will encourage experienced, effective social workers already struggling with heavy caseloads to quit, increasing caseloads for those who remain. In addition, the sensationalistic focus on the tragic and violent nature of this case and the rush to scapegoat a handful of frontline workers absolves DCFS management and L.A. County elected officials of the responsibility for reducing caseloads and reforming other problems.

For years, our union has advocated for reforms that could have helped prevent this tragedy. Here's where the department and L.A. County's elected officials should focus:

- **Caseload Reduction** — Numerous studies by child safety experts say a 15:1 caseload is optimal for protecting child safety. While L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services has made substantial progress, too many social workers are forced to carry excessive caseloads.
- **Employee Mentoring to Reduce Attrition** — Children's social work is a demanding and stressful job. Insufficient mentoring of new social workers has resulted in high turnover. In some DCFS offices, 1 in 4 social workers turns over during the work year. SEIU 721 has advocated for a mentorship program to help new social workers manage their caseloads, handle stress and learn the skills they need to protect children. The department should commit the resources to fully implement this program.

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