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Lasting reform of LA's child welfare system is how we win justice for Gabriel Fernandez

By David Green, CSW, Treasurer, SEIU Local 721

The new Netflix documentary The Trials of Gabriel Fernandez examines in unflinching detail how shortcomings in LA County's child welfare system, law enforcement and political leadership contributed to an 8-year-old boy's death in 2013 at the hands of his mother and her boyfriend.

It is hard to watch.

Over six one-hour episodes, viewers are confronted with graphic images from the crime scene and scores of interviews with health care workers, teachers, social workers and a host of experts who dissect how LA County failed to protect Gabriel. What the documentary doesn't explain is that Gabriel's death shook LA County's Children's Social Workers to the core and galvanized them to fight for change, leading to a county-wide strike and some of the largest street actions in county history. I've got a picture on my desk of the action where 8,000 public employees and community members marched on the Hahn Hall of Administration to demand "Child Safety Now."

The reforms we've won since 2013 include:

- Hiring of 3,573 additional social workers to reduce caseloads and ensure that each child and each case gets more individualized attention.

- Caps for caseloads for Children's Social Workers in the county labor contract.
- Creation of a department-wide coaching and mentoring program to ensure that every new social worker is assigned a mentor/coach with at least two year's front-line service.
- Launch of a program to recruit more high-quality foster placement opportunities.

Social work is a calling. I've been an LA County Children's Social Worker for 19 years. People who enter the profession see humanity at its worst, and directly confront unspeakable physical and sexual abuse, violence and neglect to protect children. Add to this the stress caused by juggling excessive caseloads, processing mountains of paperwork, and inability to obtain vital information from aloof or uncooperative partner agencies, and you can see why professional burnout is common and attrition is high.

Nothing we do will bring Gabriel back, but there are many lessons inside of Trials of Gabriel that can help LA County's leaders and the public at-large understand the challenges social workers face and complete the necessary reforms at DCFS to make sure nothing like Gabriel's death happens ever again
[See reverse side]:

SEIU 721 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKERS: IMPROVING CHILD SAFETY IN LA COUNTY BY WINNING THE TOOLS WORKERS NEED



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CHILD SAFETY LESSONS FROM “THE TRIALS OF GABRIEL FERNANDEZ”

- 1. Excessive caseloads put children at risk** – According to state law, the optimal ratio for child welfare cases is 15 to each Children’s Social Worker. Prior to Gabriel Fernandez’s death, LA County Children’s Social Workers carried an average of 50 to 60 cases. One of the Supervisory Children’s Social Workers on Gabriel’s case was responsible for 280 children. Our union won caseload caps in our 2019 collective bargaining agreement with a maximum of 24 cases per CSW for continuing services and 18 for emergency response services. We also should institute a similar 5 to 1 ratio for supervisors so each is responsible for overseeing the cases for a maximum of 5 front line workers.
- 2. Insufficient training, coaching and mentoring of social workers puts children at risk** – Our union fought for and won in 2017 a county-wide mentoring program for social workers that matches new hires with experienced CSWs to give them real world experience for identifying and dealing with situations that put children in danger.
- 3. High employee turnover and excessive vacancies put children at risk** – Children’s social work is a calling. The work can be incredibly rewarding but it also exposes practitioners to tragedy, abuse and the worst in human nature, leading to turnover rates as high as 40 percent. Better training, mentoring and counseling for CSWs reduces attrition and helps keep more children safe.
- 4. A shortage of high-quality foster care placement opportunities puts children at risk** – Research shows that keeping families together is the preferred method for protecting children. But when that is not an option because of substance abuse, neglect or domestic violence, CSWs depend on the availability of high-quality foster placement opportunities. We simply need to develop more if we are going to adequately protect children.
- 5. Poor coordination and information sharing among child welfare agencies, law enforcement and health care professionals puts children at risk** – All county government agencies that come into contact with children – not just the Department of Children and Family Services – have a role and a responsibility to protect the children they serve. Trials of Gabriel exposes how the failure of these agencies to share information and act on it can put children in danger.
- 6. Over-reliance on for-profit contractors puts children at risk** – Front line workers in LA County’s Palmdale welfare office were allegedly ordered not to report tell-tale signs of abuse to Gabriel to social workers because the private contractor that ran the office “didn’t want to have to pay them overtime.” Since the 1980s, LA County has grown increasingly dependent on for-profit companies to provide public services, spending \$300 million on more than 200 contracts with outside corporations.
- 7. Scapegoating front line workers for the above-mentioned systemic problems puts children at risk** – The child safety problem in LA County isn’t about bad children’s social workers who don’t do their jobs, it’s primarily about good children’s social workers who can’t do their jobs because of an over-taxed, broken system. That’s what both the Blue Ribbon Panel tasked with examining the Gabriel Fernandez case and the courts have concluded.

The Trials of Gabriel is a harrowing account, of a tragedy that sparked county-wide soul-searching about major shortcomings in LA County’s child welfare system. Its value is reminding us to re-commit to the reforms workers won in the wake of Gabriel’s death and to fight to make others a reality – like the ultimate goal of a 15-1 caseload ratio. This is how we keep LA County’s children safe and deliver justice for Gabriel.

David Green has worked for 19 years as a Children’s Social Worker with the LA County Department of Children and Family Services. He is Treasurer of his union SEIU, Local 721.

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