If anything is certain this holiday season, it’s consumer spending. Maybe not as much as pre-recession spending, but there will still be a whole lot of it. The Associated Press recently reported that the National Retail Federation expects winter holiday spending to exceed $465 billion this year. That seems unreal but it all adds up, and we are in that number somewhere.

It can be easy to take it all for granted. Sure, maybe we could have done without a few of last year’s gifts like the package of hand soap from Uncle Clark. Although it helps to be clean, soap is hard to get excited about. But that is an advantage that many of us have: we can expect and enjoy nice holiday gifts. Yet in the back of our minds, we all know that the holidays are supposed to be about giving. And with so many friends and loved ones already on our lists, in tough economic times, it is hard to think about giving to anyone else. Even so, please consider how much a gift from you—a gift of any amount—can make to a child in foster care this holiday season.

Kids in foster care aren’t banking on nice holiday gifts. They may be hoping and dreaming for them, but unfortunately many don’t have the family and friends involved who are financially or otherwise able to give. Even with the wonderful gifts, care, love, and support from their foster parents, it still can hurt during the holidays because life for a foster child often is just not fair. The good thing is that we, the community, can help this holiday season. By giving to the Shirley Eastman fund to support holiday giving to foster youth, you can make a direct, immediate impact on a foster child. How often is that possible?

Think about the happiness that child will feel when they see their gift. The gift you helped them get. Think about how they’ll smile as they play with their new toy. The confidence they will feel in their brand new clothes. Maybe they usually feel out of place at school, but tomorrow, in that outfit, things will just seem better. How many opportunities do we get to say that we made that kind of a difference? Well, this holiday season you’ll be able to say just that. And you won’t be doing it for just anyone; it will be for an Alameda County foster youth. A child that may live in your neighborhood, go to your local school, and some day will be all grown up. Maybe they’ll be a better person as an adult because while they were in foster care someone in their community was thinking and caring about them.

Please don’t delay. To donate, make your check payable to the County of Alameda – Shirley Eastman Holiday Fund or the County of Alameda – Shirley Eastman Campership Fund. Please send your donation, which may be tax deductible, to:

Alameda County Social Services Agency
Attention: A033
2000 San Pablo Avenue
Oakland, California 94612

Specific questions regarding the fund can be addressed to Robin Luckett at 510-268-7927.
Dear Colleagues and Community Partners:

As we approach the end of the year, staff at DCFS are busy preparing for one of the largest changes to foster care practice and policy in recent history: extending foster care to age 21. As you’ve likely read in past issues of the DCFS Press, youth advocates and child welfare professionals expect the extended support for young adults will lead to greater success for youth transitioning out of foster care. The extra years as non-minors in foster care will provide the buffer between childhood and adulthood that many of our youth haven’t experienced.

The age foster youth may remain in care will gradually increase over several years. Next year, beginning January 2012, youth will be able to remain in care until age 19. We eagerly await direction and guidance from state and local partners to determine some of the logistics of how this new transition age program will work. Since child welfare has exclusively served minors and their parents and relatives, it will be all new territory to continue court and county oversight for foster youth who are no longer minors and are voluntarily participating in support services. An entirely new category of foster care is being conceived and developed for this unique group of adults with unique needs to work toward self sufficiency and independence.

One of the programs we’re currently revising is our Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) training curriculum. Our transition age foster youth are encouraged to attend ILSP classes and events. These training opportunities for youth will need to include information and advocacy to ensure youth make engaged and informed decisions about deciding to participate in extended foster care. We are also developing training opportunities for staff and community partners so that they can support youth in making the decision to take advantage of the opportunity to remain in care when it’s relevant and beneficial.

I encourage all staff, caregivers, and partners in the community to prepare for this big change in the coming months by attending staff meetings, trainings as they become available, and reading about the various options for youth.

Michelle Love, Assistant Agency Director

Michelle’s Message

If any of you know Placement Child Welfare Supervisor Carrie Rudner-Davis, you know she has a great sense of humor. It’s no wonder that she has decorated the Assessment Center with adorable clothing ensembles to remind staff of the Clothes Closet. Carrie has taken on the task of organizing the Clothes Closet, which is located in the upstairs portion of the Assessment Center, and she wants staff to know that no child should ever be without clothes, because as Carrie puts it, “There are clothes up there!”

Donations come from corporations and private individuals. Some of the items are brand new while others are gently used. The Clothes Closet contains clothes, shoes, coats, baby clothes, toys, blankets, purses, and even some dresses that Carrie has modeled for us…Carrie believes that the Clothes Closet is a great example of a Department initiative that can be sustained no matter what the economic climate, but it is under-utilized. She encourages staff to visit the Clothes Closet, and staff can even bring their relative or fictive kin caregivers to the Clothes Closet to get clothing for their youth.

If you or someone you know would like to donate to the Clothes Closet, please contact Carrie by phone at (510) 780-8941 or by email rudnec@acgov.org. When considering what to donate, please remember that foster youth come in all shapes and sizes. We are in need of children’s sizes 5 and up, all teen sizes, maternity clothes, luggage, and shoes for teens. And definitely remember, our teens love fashion! ■

There are Clothes Up There!!!

by Krystal Fortner

Placement Child Welfare Supervisor Carrie Rudner-Davis

To donate to the Clothes Closet, please contact Carrie by phone at (510) 780-8941 or by email rudnec@acgov.org.
Recruitment Is...Felicia’s Business!

by Krystal Fortner

Felicia Goins Brown joined our Department on August 8, 2011 as our new foster parent recruiter! Felicia comes to us with a wealth of experience from the Faith Advisory Council where she also worked recruiting foster families.

Felicia believes recruitment is so much more than just setting up a table at an event and signing people up. “Foster parents not only foster the youth, they foster the families the youth comes from.” Felicia added, “If you have space in your home and your heart, I want to talk to you!” She said she is excited and honored to be a part of the DCFS team and learning staff’s needs around foster parents.

In addition to recruiting and retaining foster parents, Felicia runs weekly support groups for licensed foster parents and works with Chabot College and Las Positas College on foster parent training issues. Felicia said right now, she is targeting her recruitment efforts not only on homes for older foster youth, but also the LGBT population. She added, “It is an untapped resource of potential foster families.”

Felicia is interested in hearing what child welfare staff has to say about foster parent recruitment and retention. So, go on, folks...Invite Felicia to a unit meeting, give her a call, or send her an email! And remember, if you or someone you know is interested in becoming a foster parent, visit www.pathwaytohome.org, call the Foster Parent information line at (510) 259-3575, call Felicia at (510) 780-8987, or email her at felicia.browngoins@acgov.org.

If you or someone you know is interested in becoming a foster parent, visit www.pathwaytohome.org or call the Foster Parent information line at (510) 259-3575.

Alameda Kin Caregivers Enjoy Networking and Skill Building at the annual Kinship Conference

by Connie Linas

The Alameda County Kinship Conference was a huge hit this fall, with approximately 50 caregivers and over 100 children and youth enjoying the beautiful Mills College campus for a day of food, prizes, fun activities, networking, and educational workshops.

Attendees raved about the emotionally stirring presentation by Beverly Kyer on the subject of grief and loss. Ms. Kyer also facilitated a workshop about the challenges of kinship care relationships, focusing on mitigating the triangulation that can occur and providing some tools for dealing with the frustration that can arise from those dynamics. Kimberly Bradley facilitated a workshop on how grief and loss manifests in children and offered strategies for how to respond effectively to their emotional and developmental needs.

While their caregivers attended workshops, children participated in structured art and recreational activities. Teens attended a workshop dealing with respect and self-esteem with Steve Gardner. These youth also attended a Beats, Rhymes and Life workshop with Rob Jackson. Beats, Rhymes and Life is a positive youth program that strives to address the psychosocial needs of youth in a manner that builds upon their strengths and embraces their cultural expressions.

This conference was made possible through the collaborative efforts of Family Support Services of the Bay Area; Lincoln Child Center; Casey Family Programs; Legal Assistance for Seniors; Prescott-Joseph Center; and Alameda County DCFS; with assistance from the East Bay Regional Parks District, Dr. Lenora Poe, La Familia Counseling Service, and Los Positas College.

For support and resources, contact a local Kinship Support Services Program (KSSP):

Northern Alameda County KSSP:
Donna Austin-Moore, KSSP Program Director
Family Support Services of the Bay Area
401 Grand Ave., Suite 500, Oakland, CA 94610
Phone: (510) 834-2443 ext. 3008
dmoore@fssba-oak.org
Web: http://www.fssba-oak.org/programs/kinship.htm

Southern Alameda County KSSP:
Dynell Garron, KSSP Program Manager
Lincoln Child Center
1149 A Street, Hayward, CA 94541
Phone: 510-583-8026
dynellgarron@lincolnchildcenter.org
Web: http://lincolnchildcenter.org/
In life, everything we do—whether spontaneous or planned, every chance encounter, every choice, determines our future. For example, I am able to share this story about the incredible determination and personal and professional accomplishments of three individuals whose actions have positively impacted the future of three small children in this world, as a result of a few calculated (and, perhaps, not so calculated) decisions, many years ago, that began my career with Alameda County.

In the August issue of the DCFS Press, it was mentioned that our direction and decisions in the front end of child welfare services can “completely influence” the life of a case—and, that is true. However, it is not surprising that at any point in child welfare, when the outstanding work of DCFS staff and a birth mother committed to doing whatever was needed to be with her children, intersected by chance encounter, the outcome for the family was just as profound and inspiring. This is exactly what happened as a result of three highly motivated individuals, the perfect trio, who made something that could have been easily impossible, possible.

Both David Hess, a Child Welfare Worker in the SEED Program, and Jazmin Ponthier a Child Welfare Worker in the Family Preservation Program, came to the Alameda County Department of Children and Family Services for very different reasons. David, a professional singer with the San Francisco Symphony, was introduced to the Department after being interested in adopting a child in the mid-1990s through the DCFS Unit that prepared potential adoptive families and also provided training to foster parents partnering with birth families to help them reunify with their children. Although David never ended up adopting, he was asked by the Program Manager if he would be willing to provide leadership and training to foster parents. After working with the Department, David was so moved by child welfare, he decided to return to graduate school and pursue his Master’s Degree in Social Welfare with the future endeavor of working as a Child Welfare Worker at the Alameda County Department of Children and Family Services…that was 10 years ago.

Jazmin arrived at DCFS fresh out of graduate school from San Diego County where she interned in the Family Reunification Program. Jazmin has brought an incredibly strong skill set to the Department—first, in the Family Reunification Program and now in the Family Preservation Program that includes her rich, culturally diverse background. Jazmin shared that her interest in helping families was stirred as a young girl when she observed her mom frequently functioning as the family “lawyer” and counselor—offering practical advice and support to friends and family who looked to her as an exceptional problem solver. Jazmin was deeply affected and her fate was sealed when a young family member was diagnosed with mental illness. She knew that she was destined to help children and families who were struggling.

In 1998, the SEED (Services to Enhance Early Development) Program was formed as a child welfare collaborative with Children’s Hospital and Research Center Oakland’s Center for the Vulnerable Child and Public Health Nursing that focuses on the needs of children 0-5 years old who have entered the child welfare system. The SEED Program utilizes a vertical case management model to maintain continuity of child welfare support for families with the goal of improving permanency outcomes. SEED families are served by a multi-disciplinary team including the Child Welfare Worker, Children’s Hospital Therapists, Public Health Nurses and a variety of collateral support from other DCFS Programs. The beauty of the SEED Program lies in its multi-disciplinary team approach that leads to a greater likelihood of successful reunifications with birth parents, successful adoptions and overall child well-being.

David and Jazmin’s incredible partnership began with a complex SEED case involving an embattled mother of three small children who came to the attention of the Department under circumstances that were as dire as one could imagine: homelessness, a history of substance abuse, domestic violence—a young, isolated, monolingual single parent to three children (2, 4 and 5 years old) with zero support systems or resources. As the primary SEED Child Welfare Worker, David began build-
ing a relationship with his client based on honesty, trust and superb assessment, and he immediately focused on identifying his resources...enter Jazmin. David facilitated the smooth coordination of services with Children’s Hospital including intensive therapy for the oldest child who had experienced much grief and trauma. David mitigated crisis and facilitated ongoing communication amongst all involved. Jazmin did the same—both of them going the extra mile for this family month after month...after month. As the Family Preservation Child Welfare Worker, Jazmin faced the challenging task of entering a case that was already well underway and moving in a specific direction with many involved professionals, as well as foster parents who were also very interested in adoption. David and Jazmin worked together within the SEED team and facilitated bringing numerous people together (including the birth mother and foster mother) regularly—illustrating their leadership, flexibility and brilliant coordination of services. Jazmin provided seemingly effortless (and frequent) transportation for the birth mother, she supervised visits, and played a vital role in helping her navigate services and ultimately obtain safe and stable housing. Both displayed excellent interpersonal skills with a focus on managing many, many details while acknowledging everyone’s needs and points of view during the process. There were so many feelings to hold, and to express, and both David and Jazmin were able to do that while also maintaining a good sense of humor.

The remarkable efforts and sincere commitment of this birth mother were invaluable, as well. She was a very active participant in every aspect of her case plan, she answered every telephone call and she attended every meeting, despite a 2.5 hour ride on public transportation. This birth mother maintained a consistently positive attitude and it was clear that she very much understood the value of the SEED and the Family Preservation Programs, the community services being offered and the Department of Children and Family Services as a whole.

The outstanding work on this case is an example of SEED Program collaboration at its best and the details could not have been more impressive or handled more effectively if David and Jazmin had 100 years of child welfare experience between them. The future has changed for this birth mother—she has reunified with all of her children, successfully completed drug treatment and has more resolve than ever before. Jazmin’s responsibility in this case is complete and she has moved on to new Family Preservation work. David is still very much involved (remember that vertical case management model?) and he is working to ensure that dependency is dismissed. The birth mother continues to amaze and to access every service offered to her in her current service component of Family Maintenance. Because of a chance encounter and the extraordinary collaboration of *El Trio Perfecto*, the possibilities for this birth mother and her children are endless.

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**ASSEMBLY BILL 12 (AB12) PLANNING UPDATE**  
*by Cerise Grice*

On January 1, 2011, AB12 will take effect in all California Counties. This means that youth that are 18 years old and meet the eligibility criteria, can choose to remain in foster care.

These youth will be known as Non-Minor Dependents (youth ages 18-21) and will continue to have a child welfare worker or probation officer and will remain under direction of the juvenile court.

Alameda County expects many Non-Minor Dependents to remain in their current family placements. AB12 will not change the Department’s commitment to pursuing permanency outcomes for foster youth.

In the past several months, regular planning meetings comprised of child welfare, probation, foster youth (Foster Youth Alliance EBLCO, service providers, our Youth Board, and others) have been held to discuss the implementation of AB12. These meetings will continue far beyond January 1, 2011, and have provided a wealth of information, quality input and considerations for AB12 implementation.

More information will be shared in future publications.
A placement decision is one of the most important decisions made in a foster child’s life, so it is no wonder that in this year alone, we have held 1,344 TDMs (as of 9/30/11). And for those of you who don’t know, (T) stands for team, (D) stands for decision, and (M) stands for making. Add “meeting” to the end of that acronym, and you got yourself a TDM meeting…

On September 6, 2011, TDMs, the Parent Advocates, and the Linkages liaisons all became housed together again. We now have eight Parent Advocates, with plans to hire four more, and their focus in TDMs is to be the parent’s voice. Parent Advocates primarily attend front-end TDMs (where families enter the foster care system), while Youth Fellows primarily attend back-end TDMs (where families/youth exit the foster care system) where they are the youth’s voice. In an effort to provide coordinated case planning for families, the Linkages liaisons attend TDMs in cases where the parent is receiving Cal-WORKS.

Two of the goals of the TDM program in 2012 are to increase reunification and permanency TDMs and to increase placement stabilization TDMs in an effort to avoid seven-day notices. To reach these goals, Svetlana Lesova, Program Manager of TDM, Parent Advocates, and Linkages, hosts a monthly roundtable discussion to promote cooperation and collaboration with the various community partners and Agency staff who regularly attend TDMs. Reunification TDMs are a great place to plan for a child’s safe reunification by creating a safety plan and identifying family supports to address any potential challenges that a newly reunified family may face. This planning can also help reduce the number of children who reenter foster care.

“The TDM philosophy believes in having all the key players at the table, and for the decision to be made with the family, not for the family,” replied Svetlana when asked what makes for a successful TDM. Svetlana added, “A placement decision should be made by the team, not by an individual.”

Remember, a TDM should be held immediately when a child has been removed from a parent or before any type of placement change (including reunification). To schedule a TDM, call 780(5)-8997.
There is a workgroup at DCFS called the Spanish Language Advisory Committee (SLAC), which consists mostly of Child Welfare Workers (CWWs). They take extra time out of their busy day to meet, discuss issues affecting Spanish speaking families, and come up with solutions to address those issues. The group came into its current form about a year ago, and already they have published a resource guide with almost 200 different services available to Spanish speaking families in Alameda County. The guide is designed to help workers in their efforts to serve families, and it has services for almost everything: from food banks and employment services, to mental health and legal help.

In developing the resource guide, SLAC members spent countless hours on the phone and in the streets contacting agencies and learning about their services. For providers with something to offer, information about their program was collected by a SLAC member, and then later it was organized into the guide by the group’s facilitators, Elsa Saenz & Jazmin Ponthier. All this extra time spent by the group was in addition to their regular job duties! Jazmin describes the effort as collaborative, and recognizes how the group benefited from “keeping a timeline and meeting every month,” and that “there was a lot of motivation behind it.”

SLAC is unique, observes Jazmin, because it deals with immigration and language issues. It is working to help Spanish speaking families, who, says Elsa, face “barriers with language and education, and are often in poverty. We can’t ignore that the Latino population is growing in California,” notes Elsa, so SLAC is working to help our Agency become “equipped with the knowledge, resources, and protocols” to best work with this population, and to “be prepared for the Spanish speaking children who come to our attention.”

SLAC’s objective is to improve the service delivery for Spanish speaking and immigrant families that come in contact with DCFS. That aligns well with ongoing Department efforts to address disproportionality. SLAC is currently exploring how services from the Mexican Consulate office in the U.S. can benefit families served by DCFS.

Membership is open to anyone in DCFS, including non-Spanish speaking workers. There are monthly meetings, and it is understood that members can’t make it to them all. Please contact Elsa Saenz (saenzea@acgov.org) or Jazmin Ponthier (ponthj@acgov.org) if you’re interested in attending a SLAC meeting.
Annual DCFS Staff Appreciation Picnic  
by Selia Johnson

This year’s DCFS staff appreciation picnic was held on September 27, 2011 at the San Leandro Marina, and proved to be much more animated than the previous years. Attendance was up, and the entertainment included a very “En Vogue” Flash Mob that set out to “Free Your Mind” led by Program Manager Brittany Walker Pettigrew.

Our department executive team including our Interim Assistant Agency Director, Michelle Love did a fantastic job of cooking all the food for this special event and making sure it was a success for staff. The food was cooked to perfection and plentiful with delicious sides that accompanied the grilled meats. Staff really appreciated the hard work that was put into this event, and they seemed to enjoy it.

Fun and games were had by all when staff from Eden took on staff from OMO in a kickball competition. The game was action packed and highly competitive as Oakland took the win…!

Thank you to all the managers who contributed their time, effort, and funds to make this year’s staff appreciation a success.

Youth S.C.O.R.E. Awards for Youth in Foster Care  
by Cerise Grice

The Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA), Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has been honored to work in partnership with the Alameda County Board of Supervisors for several years to honor deserving current and former foster youth with special recognition of Real Effort in making significant contributions to family or community; academic, sports or extracurricular activities; arts/dance/music, personal growth and other significant contributions.

An Annual Youth S.C.O.R.E. Presentation will be held in April 2012 at the Alameda County Board of Supervisors’ Chambers. Six (6) Youth will receive a Youth S.C.O.R.E Award signed by the Social Services Agency Director, the Department of Children and Family Services Director and the President of the Board of Supervisors. They will also receive a $50 gift card.

To nominate a youth for Youth S.C.O.R.E, please contact Cerise Grice at 510-780-8828 or cgrice@acgov.org.