



# DHS News Flash



## Dell Meriwether and Cynthia Figueroa Named DHS Deputy Commissioners

**D**HS Commissioner, Anne Marie Ambrose, has appointed two new Deputy Commissioners. Dell Meriwether has been promoted to Deputy Commissioner of the Children and Youth Division and Cynthia Figueroa has joined DHS as Deputy Commissioner of the Prevention Services Division.

“I am very excited about these appointments,” says Ambrose. “Both of these individuals bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the Department and will help us move forward in the right direction.”

### Dell Meriwether

Dell Meriwether, who has been employed with the Department of Human Services since 1984, formerly served as Acting Director of Courts and Related Services where he was responsible for ensuring smooth coordination between DHS and Family Court. He was also responsible for overseeing the Achieving Reunification Program (ARC), Achieving Independence Center (AIC) and Teen Placement Diversion Program. Meriwether received both his Bachelors and Masters Degrees at the University of Houston.

While there is much he hopes to accomplish in his new position, Meriwether says he has three primary goals. First, to ensure that youth in care are safe and that their needs are being adequately met. Second, to reduce the amount of time children and youth spend in care by ensuring timely permanency through reunifi-

cation, adoption or kinship care. And finally, to meet all the requirements for State Inspection, so that the Department gets its license back.



*Dell Meriwether*

Meriwether notes that one of the greatest challenges facing DHS is the size of the agency and the amount of paperwork that must be completed by social workers. One of his key tasks will be to reevaluate processes and look for ways to build efficiencies into the organization. Here, he will draw on his experience as Director of Courts, where he successfully reduced the amount of time social workers spend in court.

He is a strong proponent of incorporating technology that will enable social workers are able to spend less time on paperwork and more time in the field. In particular he would like to see electronic case records and forms that, to the extent possible, fill in automatically. He also believes decision making tools can help social workers become more efficient, effective and confident in their work. Additionally, he says, he will continue to work to improve coordination with the court.

Because CYD services are mandated, recently announced city-wide funding cuts will not result in a reduction of CYD services. However, Meriwether notes that the sagging economy and dwindling resources are a key concern for child welfare advocates not only in the city, but the nation as a whole. “We need to do everything possible to ensure that services to children and families

remain a priority for this administration,” he says. “The great paradox is that as the economy worsens, there is less money for services but the number of people who



*Cynthia Figueroa*

need assistance continues to grow.”

Meriwether is committed to maintaining credibility with those families. “Our ability to work cooperatively with community members is contingent on our ability to provide substantial services that are focused on the needs of families,” he says. To that end, he is enthusiastic about the direction that Commissioner Ambrose is moving the agency. “I’m totally supportive of the new Commissioner and her efforts to make DHS a more productive workplace that positively impacts the lives of children and families,” he says.

### Cynthia Figueroa

Before joining DHS last month, Cynthia Figueroa was Executive Director of Women Against Abuse. There, she led the development and implementation of the 24-hour Philadelphia Domestic Violence Hotline, resulting in the consolidation of four hotlines into one city-wide, toll free number. She also played an instrumental role in a building development project with the City, which resulted in a 49% increase in shelter beds for domestic violence victims in Philadelphia.

Figueroa is a Board Member for Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania and prior to her DHS appointment, she also served as Secretary of the Board for Congreso de Latinos Unidos and Division Chair for the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania Campaign Cabinet. She was recently named by Philadelphia Business Journal as one of the city’s 40 individuals, under the age of 40, who are proven performers in their respective industries and communities.

As Deputy Commissioner of the Prevention Division, Figueroa says her charge is to implement the recommendations in the Prevention Realignment Report, which calls for ensuring

that Prevention services are better aligned with the Department’s other primary divisions—Children and Youth and Juvenile Justice.

“The Prevention Division has been challenged to be all things to all people,” she says. “The Division offers a diverse range of services but not all are directly in line with DHS’ mission. We need ensure that services are tied into the Department as a whole.”

According to Figueroa, the first step in that process is defining clear-cut goals for the Prevention Division and identifying the target population for services. “Then we need to

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examine what are the most effective services for meeting the needs of at-risk youth as they relate to the Department’s overall mission,” she says.

The need for the division to more clearly delineate its focus is particularly urgent in light of recent budget cuts, which have resulted in a significant reduction in Prevention funding. Her challenge, she says, is to determine how to get the most impact for the scarce resources that exist. As a result, she notes there will likely be a new process for contracts. Moreover, she says the Division will be looking more closely at provider outcomes and holding providers more accountable.

“Coming from the provider community, I think one of the things I bring to the table is an understanding of the provider perspective,” she explains. As a result, she hopes to im-

prove communication and coordination between the Department and providers and to convey clear and consistent expectations.

Despite the funding cuts, she believes the Prevention Division will ultimately be stronger and more effective. “I’m extremely excited to be part of this administration,” she says. I think it says a lot about the Commissioner’s commitment to prevention services to appoint a Deputy Commissioner to the Division. She has put together an incredible team and I believe we have enormous potential.”

Noting that the Prevention Division is a vital link between the department and the Community, Figueroa says that one of her primary goals for the division is to enhance community relations. She believes her work with many of the Department’s constituents in her previous role, will be beneficial in this effort. “For most of my career I have worked with families affected by domestic violence. These families face the same issues as our clients and in many cases are DHS involved,” she says.

In addition to drawing from her own experience, Figueroa says she plans to convene a diverse group of providers to determine the best ways to advance relationships within the community.

“Our providers are integral parts of the communities we serve and are in tune with the issues and concerns of residents. Their input is critical to our efforts to instill community trust and confidence in the agency.”

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