

# NEWS RELEASE

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 2019

### **FOCUSING FIRST ON STABILIZING MEASURES TO PRESERVE FAMILIES BEFORE CHILDREN ARE REMOVED FROM THEIR PARENTS' CUSTODY**

EDISON — For Ozelia the hard times came in bunches. It happened so quickly. Less income as government financial support programs ended and her son's social security benefits were terminated. There was no pay during the summer months from her seasonal job. The rent went unpaid. The landlord told her to get out. She searched for places to stay. Nothing. Finally she turned to what she saw as "the last resort."

The Essex County woman and her seven year old son took refuge in a nearby laundromat which effectively became their bedroom.

Every year the State Division of Child Protection & Permanency (DCP&P) removes several thousand alleged neglected or abused children from their parents' custody. Far fewer potential removals, though, are short-circuited in advance by preventive measures like those that ultimately turned up for Ozelia and her boy.

Ozelia's dilemma, especially her fear that her son would be taken from her because of inadequate living conditions, is one of the many cases being highlighted at a special event Monday, June 24 by Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ). The cases underscore the need for stabilizing measures to avoid removals, taking all necessary steps to have parents successfully reunited with their children as quickly as possible.

Every year LSNJ pays tribute to families that have been successful in doing what was required to bring their families back together with the kids. The celebration is known as Family Unification Day. This year the emphasis is on preventing removals of children before they happen — in effect taking steps like those afforded Ozelia to keep her and the boy together.

As a result, 20 families from Camden, Essex, Hudson, Mercer, Monmouth, Morris and Passaic Counties will be honored at the ceremonies that begin at 2 p.m. in the New Jersey Law Center in New Brunswick. Also being honored are 10 case workers, lawyers, social workers, clinicians and others who helped keep the families together.

As with such past events, there likely will be many tears and hugs from the families and others witnessing the outpouring of emotions at the public event.

Jeyanthi Rajaraman, Chief Counsel for LSNJ's Family Representation Project, says poverty impacts about 90 percent of families involved with DCP&P.

“It is essential to recognize how lack of finances can hurt a family in obtaining decent housing and overcoming barriers in accessing immediate services for drug, mental health and domestic violence problems,” she asserts.

For Ozelia it was the lack of housing that put her in jeopardy of seeing her son possibly removed by the state from her care.

Ironically, the laundromat turned out to be a kind of blessing. Police were called and helped her get into the YMCA. DCP&P was notified and instead of removing her son, the DCP&P caseworkers worked together in assisting Ozelia in paying her rental arrears balance, providing temporary shelter and being available to her on a daily basis.

Ozelia now is back in her apartment with her son, but she still recalls how nervous she was when DCP&P first was notified.

“I was scared and I said, ‘you know I’m not an abusive or negligent mother.’ I was like, Oh my God, what if they take my child from me? You know over a simple mistake.”

LSNJ and other children’s advocates believe there are far more cases that can be resolved without first removing kids from families.

Denise Moss, a supervisor at DCP&P, oversaw Ozelia’s case and at Monday’s ceremonies is one of the individuals being called a “Family Unification Day Hero” for her efforts in bringing about satisfactory endings. She says families facing many burdens often need help getting services that will keep them together.

“Like this (Ozelia) case it was housing. Sometimes it’s a drug treatment program. Sometimes it’s parenting skills. Cause you’re overwhelmed. And you’re by yourself with three or four kids and there’s no family supports. ... We try to see what that underlying need is. Cause what that underlying need is — we need to work on that to make you more whole in your parenting abilities.”

And that, says LSNJ's Rajaraman, "is what should be the primary concern of all involved parties — focusing on preventive measures to keep families together and reducing unnecessary removals."

Speakers at the event include Essex County Superior Court Judges Sallyanne Floria and David B. Katz, and Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner of the federal Children's Bureau, and that agency's special assistant David Kelly.

*Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ), located in Edison, heads the state's Legal Services system, a network of six independent non-profit corporations and has been providing free essential legal aid in civil matters to low-income people through offices in all 21 counties for more than 50 years. Since its inception, LSNJ has provided representation in more than 2.4 million cases.*

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