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### **Court center eases the trial for kids**

By John Canalis, The Report

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Nancy Rodriguez, 4, and Maria Ayala read a book at Kids Place, a daycare center at Long Beach Superior Court. Four childcare workers and volunteers watch children from babyhood to 13 whose parents have court business. (Jeff Gritchen / Staff Photographer)



Aden Monterosa, right, discusses toy food choices with Natalie Salyers at Kids Place, a Long Beach courthouse day-care center run by the nonprofit For the Child. It offers children a safe place to be while parents are testifying or appearing in court. (Jeff Gritchen / Staff Photographer)

#### **LONG BEACH –**

With her husband on trial, Dora Prieto feels comfortable leaving her three children at the daycare center in Long Beach Superior Court.

"I am so lucky I have a place the kids can go," she says while picking up her son, Alfonso, 2, on a recent morning. "They can stay here and be entertained while we're going through this hard time."

Parents drop off their children at Kids' Place so they can attend to the courtroom business without little ones tugging at their pant legs, crying or hearing testimony not suitable for young ears.

The 6-year-old center, which is funded by a Long Beach-based nonprofit, For the Child, can serve 20 children at a time.

Four full-time childcare workers and a cadre of volunteers watch children as old as 13 and, in one case, as young as a day. The county courthouse provides the no-cost space to the private organization. Supervisor Don Knabe gave up his field office at the court in 2002 to make room for the center.

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"I really think it's a great example of public and private entities working together to meet the needs of kids and families," says Michele Winterstein, For the Child executive director.

Kids' Place is not for use by court employees or jurors - only parents with official business, and only when they are in the courthouse. Bailiffs, judges and attorneys recommend that parents take their children to Kids' Place, particularly in difficult cases, such as domestic violence or custody battles.

"When families come to court, it's not always their best day," Winterstein says.

Testimony can be raw in many cases and often involves children's parents. Sometimes moms and dads enter the courtroom in handcuffs, chains and jailhouse garb - not the best thing for their children to see.

"They shouldn't be in the courtroom hearing these horrible things about their parents," says Superior Court Judge Deborah Andrews. "They shouldn't be seeing their parents in custody."

In the late 1990s, Andrews and other women who work at the court identified the need for daycare. For Andrews, the last straw was when a mother was waiting in her courtroom with a stroller. The judge instructed the woman to wait outside.

"Eventually, I called her case, and when she came in, she was alone - no baby," Andrews says. "So I said, 'Where's the baby?' and she said, 'He's out in the hall.' She had left the baby outside in a stroller in the hall in the Long Beach courthouse.

"This is not a safe place for babies to be left alone. We needed a safe place for children to wait while the adults and their lawyers carried on court business."

That led to the first child waiting room in an L.A. County Superior Court. There have been more than 33,000 child visits since the center opened in August 2002.

A few other L.A. Superior Courts have opened daycares, though the other Southeast-area branches, such as Bellflower, Compton and Norwalk, have not.

Initial funding for Long Beach came from voter-approved tobacco taxes.

For the Child relies on donations and grants to fund the center's \$200,000 a year budget.

Upon checking in at Kids' Place, parents and children are given matching wristbands to prevent the wrong person from picking up their children - a real issue in custody cases. Sometimes custody changes from the time the child is dropped off and when they are picked up, but court employees know to send down paperwork to the ground-floor center.

Anyone who has seen the early morning line outside the courthouse knows demand for childcare can be high when doors open at 8 a.m. The throngs often arrive with children in tow.

"It's first-come, first-served," says Isabelle Pasilla, program director of Kids' Place. "We try to serve as many families and children as we can because the need is so prevalent."

When the center is not at capacity, employees go up to the courtrooms and hallways to tell parents there is space.

"For the kids who are here on a regular basis, they see this as their school," Pasilla says of cases that can drag for months.

Parents have abandoned their children at Kids' Place. Others, believing they will not be arrested with children at the courthouse, have been taken into custody.

In those cases, employees wait, sometimes well into the evening, until relatives or social workers arrive.

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"Isabelle is pretty modest, but she and her team go the extra mile," Winterstein says.

Pasilla has a degree in criminal justice from Cal State Long Beach and puts it to use when explaining court proceedings and paperwork to parents and when helping children testify in sensitive cases.

Child-care provider April Sam's language skills are in demand. She is fluent in three languages commonly spoken in court: English, Spanish and Khmer.

Though adjustment can be hard in the first minutes after a child is dropped off, by the time their parents come to pick them up, Sam says, "They don't want to leave. They cry and throw a tantrum, (saying) 'I don't want to go.'"

On a recent day, 4-year-old Kyeanti Fulmore was doing anything but crying as she polished off a graham cracker and headed over to play a video game.

Kyeanti says her favorite part of the center is "toys and other kids."

Nancy Rodriguez, 4, says she likes playing with the Play-Doh and making friends.

On another morning, infants were being rocked and read to in English and Spanish by Carolina Mendoza.

Tykes were seated at a table, making valentines from construction paper.

The decor inside is African, Latin American and Moroccan in theme. There is a well-stocked "La Libreria" and oversized stuffed animals lining colorful rugs. A sign near the entrance reads, "Precious Cargo: Handle with Care."

"I think it's good," says Tonia Callejas, who came to pick up her 2-year-old, Isaiah Pena. "They play around with them. They keep them entertained. The judge wouldn't like a lot of noise. Here they can do whatever they want, play, talk."

The city and state are working on a proposal to raze the aging courthouse and build a new one on a nearby lot in downtown.

Questions have arisen about the fate of Kids' Place.

Judge Andrews says she has already been told there will be room for the center if the new courthouse is built.

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