



February 4, 2021

To: The Honorable Susan Talamantes Eggman  
Chair, Senate Budget Subcommittee No. 3

Honorable Members  
Senate Budget Subcommittee No. 3

The Honorable Dr. Joaquin Arambula  
Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 1

Honorable Members  
Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 1

From: Cathy Senderling-McDonald, Executive Director, CWDA  
Rebecca Gonzales, Director of Legislative Affairs, NASW  
Liberty Sanchez, Governmental Relations Advocate, SEIU-CA

**RE: CHILD WELFARE TRAINING SYSTEM – AUGMENT  
GOVERNOR’S PROPOSAL BY \$7 MILLION**

The County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA), Service Employees Union International (SEIU)-CA and the National Association of Social Workers, California Chapter appreciate the Governor’s budget proposal to invest \$5.9 million General Fund (GF) into the Child Welfare Services (CWS) Training System to address critical underfunding in this program that prepares social workers in serving our state’s most vulnerable population of children and youth. While this proposal is a good start, it falls short of meeting the current needs of child welfare staff and our partner agencies to support their incredibly difficult and complex work and ultimately, to improve outcomes for the children, youth and families served in the child welfare program. For this reason, our Coalition requests an augmentation of \$7 million GF to modernize the training system.

**Background**

In California’s state-supervised, county-administered child welfare program, the State holds the responsibility to administer the CWS Training System. This obligation is outlined in Welfare and Institutions Code (W&IC) Section 16200 et. seq., (Chapter 1310, Statutes of 1987),

which requires the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to develop and implement a statewide coordinated training program that provides “practice-relevant training” for social workers and supervisors, agencies under contract with county welfare departments, mandated child abuse reporters, and all members of the child welfare delivery system.

The Legislature reaffirmed the State’s role in administering the CWS Training System through 2011 Realignment. Under 2011 Realignment, the funding responsibility for the child welfare and foster care program shifted to counties, such that counties became 100 percent responsible for meeting program mandates. However, the Legislature and Administration specifically excluded the CWS Training System from Realignment, thereby retaining the State’s responsibility to administer and fund the CWS Training System in recognition of the importance of a state-level role to promote consistency across the 58 counties.

California’s current child welfare training system is nationally recognized for its innovations and has many strengths. Newly hired child welfare workers and supervisors receive classroom-based training delivered through one of four Regional Training Academies (RTAs) in partnership with higher education. To ensure statewide consistency in training, the curriculum development is coordinated by the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC), an organization which partners educators and practitioners to promote workforce excellence in human services and specifically in child welfare, behavioral health, and aging.

### **Training Challenges**

Although our training system has many strengths, it is insufficiently resourced to meet the growing demands from the ever-changing child welfare system. In addition, research-based strategies to support increased knowledge and skill-development are not currently reflected in our training system. While we appreciate the one-time training provided when a new law is passed, this is rarely sufficient to support policy makers’ intent for practice change. New initiatives also require training and re-training, as laws change and as practices evolve. CDSS issues guidance to counties through All County Letters and Information Notices to support the implementation of new laws, and while this is appreciated, it is in and of itself not sufficient in ensuring that new mandates are implemented as envisioned by stakeholders and policy makers.

### **Federal Oversight and Potential Fiscal Penalties**

California is currently implementing a federally required Program Improvement Plan (PIP) and is struggling to achieve outcome improvement targets in several areas of the PIP, including engagement with families, reducing recurrence of maltreatment, placement stability, and establishing appropriate and timely permanency goals. Failure to improve

outcomes identified in the PIP will result in fiscal sanctions to the State and counties. The State's Self Assessment, which included a review of the Statewide Training System, identified this area as a strength but noted several challenges and areas for improvement. Specifically, the Self Assessment found that counties struggled to comply with regulatory requirements to train new county child welfare staff and supervisors due to poor timing of offered classes, classes not being offered frequently enough, inconvenient training location, trainings not coordinated with hiring dates of new staff, and cancellations of scheduled classes by the Regional Training Academies. Many counties also report having to dedicate their own local resources for training of their staff to fill this gap, which diverts funding for services and programs to meet the needs of foster children and their families.

The PIP, which is a joint plan of the State and counties to improve outcomes, also cites several activities aimed at improving outcomes, many of which are dependent upon our CWS Training System. This includes coaching to enhance child, youth and family engagement through child and family teams and Safety Organized Practice, improved training delivery for resource families, and increased training in trauma-based interventions and services. Without new resources to the training system, it is unclear how we will be successful in achieving our targeted outcome improvements as negotiated with the federal government.

### **Current Training is Not Aligned to Best Practice**

The complex work of the child welfare requires a highly trained, highly skilled workforce to meet ever-changing federal and state legislative mandates and high expectations from the community to keep California's children safe from harm and provide trauma-informed care and services. Unfortunately, our counties continue to struggle with recruitment and retention of its social workers for a variety of reasons, including inadequate training and support, demanding workload, external pressures to ensure child safety, and exposure to secondary trauma. According to various CalSWEC surveys of counties, the turnover rate of California's Title IV-E graduates is approximately 30-40 percent within three-and-a-half years of graduation, and over 20 percent for all child welfare staff. Furthermore, turnover is costly to counties: national research indicates a cost of \$54,000 each social worker leaving the agency and in California the cost is likely much higher. Research further shows that caseworker turnover is associated with a host of negative outcomes for children, youth and families including longer stays in foster care and decreased likelihood of reunification.

A highly-functioning, relevant training system is a key factor in supporting workforce needs and increasing social worker retention. The research is clear that classroom-based training alone is unlikely to lead to practice changes and desired improvements. Training systems which invest in a coaching model and intensive training to supervisors are more likely to lead to reduced turnover and improved delivery of services and outcomes, including more timely investigations, better engagement of children and families, and improvements in safety, permanency and well-being outcomes.

## Building an Effective Child Welfare Training System

Based on the research, we urge the Legislature to augment the Administration's proposal by \$7 million SGF to implement the following activities and improvements:

- **Supervisor Coaching Component:** Classroom-based training must be followed by competency-based coaching from supervisors to their social work staff, delivered on a daily basis. Supervisors need to have the skills and knowledge to provide constant observation, feedback, emotional and practical support to their staff. The current PIP acknowledges the important role of coaching to improve outcomes and has set expectations for increased training that includes coaching, yet the CWS Training System is not resourced sufficiently to support a coaching-based training model.
- **Advanced Training in Subject-Specific Policies and Practices:** Current training is a "one and done" approach accomplished largely through the "Common Core" given to new social work staff and supervisors upon hiring and 20 hours per year of on-going training on general practice. This training is augmented on subject-specific practices only when new legislation is passed. Additional training opportunities are needed to deepen understanding and knowledge of the complexities of child welfare services, to convey emerging best practices in alignment with state and federal policies and directives, and to address promote improvement in needed areas, particularly in alignment with federal PIP objectives.
- **Training to Other Key Staff Serving Children, Youth and Families in Child Welfare:** Additional training support is needed to develop skills and capacity of other county child welfare staff who perform essential support work for social work staff. For example, many counties utilize family service workers to provide critical transportation and trauma-informed visitation support to youth and families yet there are no training opportunities. The Integrated Core Practice Model, required as part of the State's Katie A. Settlement Agreement, sets expectations of partnership in service planning and delivery for both child welfare, probation, and mental health yet without training support. Others including resource families and services providers (i.e. education, regional centers) need training in trauma-informed practices specifically to support foster children, youth and families.
- **Virtual Simulation Labs:** Classroom-based training by itself to reinforce expected practices. Counties such as Los Angeles have implemented laboratories for staff to simulate real-world social work practice in investigations, assessments, and child/family interviewing. Virtual simulations are cost-efficient alternatives showing success in bridging classroom-based training to social work practice.
- **Evaluation of Training to Support Practice Change:** Training requires a "feedback loop" to learn whether or not training actually impacts child and family outcomes, and to determine whether training should be re-tooled ensure training leads to practice change in the field.

## Conclusion

We greatly appreciate the Governor's January Budget proposal to add \$5.9 million GF to the training system. Although the investment is helpful, it still falls short of modernizing the Child Welfare Training System to lead to the practice changes that ultimately, will improve outcomes. To address this, we request an augmentation of \$7 million GF to the Governor's January Budget proposal to ensure our training system reflects current research and practices in supporting social workers and other critical stakeholders in delivering services to vulnerable children and families.

California's child welfare system has made strides forward, reducing the use of congregate care and reducing the overall number of children in the foster care system. Yet, county child welfare agencies continue to struggle with workforce issues that prevent us from achieving improvements expected by the federal government, policy makers and stakeholders. Investing in the workforce, by modernizing the child welfare training system, will allow California to continue our momentum forward in meeting desired outcomes for children, youth and families.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

cc: Chris Woods, Office of the Senate President Pro Tempore  
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