

CWDA Testimony on the Proposed Cuts to Child Welfare Services
Senate Budget Subcommittee No. 3
April 21, 2008, 10:30 a.m., State Capitol Building, Room 112

Madam Chair and members, I am Ingrid Harita, the County Welfare Director for Orange County Social Services Agency.

The County Welfare Directors Association and the Orange County Board of Supervisors are strongly opposed to any cuts in child welfare services. These short-sighted cuts would harm our most vulnerable children and families, and literally turn back the clock on efforts for reform.

The Administration's budget reduces child welfare funding by nearly \$130 million, which translates into a 15.9 percent cut to this vital program. Statewide, this will result in 653 fewer social workers on the ground serving children and families. This is on top of the 381 workers that are lost this budget year because counties won't be funded for cost-of-doing-business, for a total loss of 1,034 social workers to protect children and serve families.

Cuts to child welfare means that children will be left in dangerous, potentially life-threatening situations. In Orange County, we'll lose \$5.5 million, which translates into a potential loss of 30 social workers and cuts in vital services for abused and neglected children.

And, because the state hasn't indicated what specific services counties should stop providing, the state is basically punting these impossible decisions to county child welfare directors and Boards of Supervisors. To us, their unwillingness to specify what we should stop doing indicates that these cuts shouldn't be made at all. We can't just make do with less in a system that is already so underfunded. We may be forced to triage abuse cases, not go out on neglect cases whatsoever, respond to reports less promptly, or not see children on a monthly basis like we do now. However, the public will not be forgiving when a child dies in an abusive home because "we didn't get there in time."

What would these cuts mean? Statewide, about 16,000 calls to our emergency response hotline could go unanswered each month, nearly 500 in Orange County alone – leaving these children at risk of injury or even death. As services to families are cut, annually 35,000 fewer families statewide would receive family maintenance services to prevent children from being removed. This cut could translate into longer time to family reunification for over 27,000 families.¹ For the 77,000 children currently in care statewide, over 54,000 of them are likely to languish in foster care because counties won't have the staff to find permanent loving homes for them.

¹ Orange County specific impact of cuts and potential loss of 30 social workers translates into 1,050 fewer families served in Family Maintenance; 810 fewer families served in Family Reunification; 1,620 children not receiving PP services annually.

The LAO proposed cut of 3% would equate to a loss of \$32.1 million and reduction in services: 3,000 fewer ER investigations per month, 6,600 fewer services in FM; 5,000 fewer FR services to families, and 10,000 kids in PP (all statewide figures).

The proposed cuts are made worse by the fact that child welfare is already expected to do much more for children and families than we can with current funding. We're hindered by an outdated budget yardstick that expects county staff to oversee 30 to 55 foster children, while the recommended standard is 10 to 15 children.

Counties have recognized the need for better services and have stepped up. Counties overmatch this program by over \$170 million each year, over and above what we are required to spend. Our county invests \$32 million in County General Fund above what we receive from the federal and state governments. This has enabled us to increase services to children and families by reducing caseloads to about twice the optimal standard recommended by the SB 2030 study. We still need 300 more social workers to achieve the optimal level of service and staffing.

Unfortunately, the Administration's proposed cut cannot be made up with county dollars because our local budgets are being hit with many other cuts to law enforcement, health and other local services.

These cuts will also reverse the progress we've made in child welfare. In Orange County, for example, our reunification and adoption performance beat the national performance standard and exceed the statewide average. In 2001, we had 800 children in group home care. Today, we have only 158, an 80 percent reduction.

We have more work to do as a State and locally. Orange County is working to improve our placement stability rates and reduce the recurrence of maltreatment. The State failed its first federal review and faces an \$8.9 million federal penalty. California just completed a second federal review and failed all 7 outcome measures. Once again California must enter into a Program Improvement Plan to improve our outcomes. We will have only 2 years to do so or face fiscal penalties of about \$80 million.

The Legislature has recognized this need for improvement by enacting policy changes and making investments into the program. Any cuts to child welfare would undermine legislative efforts for real reform, will hurt children and families, and will cost us dearly in the long run.

The state has a higher obligation to foster children because these are "our" children -- we are their parents, and we share this obligation to care for foster children. We know you face a lot of difficult choices in this budget year, but our duty to keep children safe is higher.

I respectfully urge you to exempt child welfare from any budget cuts. The Legislature and this Governor exempted child welfare in 2004 when faced with budget deficits. In fact, the Governor's own restoration message said this: "simply put, failure to restore funding has the potential to jeopardize the health and safety of California's most vulnerable children."

These children are still vulnerable, and they still need our help. Please protect children from harm by preserving child welfare services.

Thank you, and along with CWDA, I can answer any questions the Committee may have.