

TESTIMONY TO THE ASSEMBLY BUDGET SUBCOMMITTEE NO. 1 ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES ON THE PROPOSED CHILD WELFARE CUTS

APRIL 30, 2008

Madam Chair and Members

My name is Catherine Huerta and I am the Director of the Fresno County Department of Children and Families which in my county serves children in the child welfare system and children receiving mental health services.

I am here today representing CWDA and my County Board of Supervisors in urging that before any cuts are made to the CW budget careful consideration is given on the impact this would have on the most vulnerable children of our State. I would also ask that you evaluate the impact on the outcomes of the work Child Welfare has done in the last five years.

We know you have a lot of difficult decisions to make this budget year. I implore you to spare abused and neglected children from these budget cuts. They are not to blame for this budget deficit and therefore should not be held responsible to fix this budget.

The proposed budget would reduce child welfare funding by nearly \$130 million dollars, which translates into a 15.9% cut to our program. This is much greater than the 10% across the board recommended cuts proposed by Administration. The proposed funding also doesn't indicate what specific services counties should stop providing to abused and neglected children which means Directors, and their Boards of Supervisors, will be forced to make these impossible choices.

This loss of dollars translates to 1,034 fewer social workers in counties across our state working in programs that your Legislature acknowledged were overworked when you mandated a new state workload analysis in 2006. This analysis conducted by UC Davis concluded that social work caseloads were too high and that social worker caseloads do matter when it comes to providing quality child welfare services. Your legislature also invested in child welfare as recently as 2006-07 when you allocated \$61.4 million in General Funds to support outcome improvements. The proposed cuts for this next budget cycle would undermine all of that investment, have child welfare take a minimum of a five year step back in time and more importantly have a direct negative impact on our abused and neglected children.

In addition to the improvements supported by your investment counties have partnered with philanthropy to improve services. Efforts such as team decision making and differential response have reduced the number of children in the system, improved safety and enabled us to find permanent homes for children with relatives and other caring adults. There has been improved communication and increased collaboration among service providers and community partners. For the first time child welfare does not feel alone in the work they do.

These partnerships and best practice strategies have also shown significant savings to the State. In Fresno County alone we have reduced our dependent population by almost 1000 children since 2003. Statewide the foster care population has decreased from 102,000 in

2001 to just over 77,000 in 2007. This equates to a 25% reduction of children in care thus reducing significant dollars in foster care.

If these cuts go through Directors may be forced to choose to triage our child abuse referrals and responses. Referrals often offer limited information and only a contact can differentiate the level of risk.

Let me give you an example of what this could look like. My department received a call from a teacher reporting her third grader appeared unkempt, often listless and tired and possibly malnourished. The child had not disclosed any physical abuse but did say she was glad she came to school because she was often hungry. We responded to the call and found two more children in the home, a two year old and an infant. Both children were significantly underweight and the infant ended up being hospitalized for severe dehydration and failure to thrive. Most of the limited income coming into the home was supporting the parent's drug habits. We removed the children, completed our investigation and offered the parents reunification services. Both parents failed to comply, and when no extended family was found the children were placed and are going to be adopted by a family as a sibling group.

A good outcome yes, but odds are that these children would have been left in harm's way based on the best but limited information we initially received. I say this because statewide over 19,000 similar hotline calls could go without a response in this state on a monthly basis- over 230,000 calls annually. How would this impact the family of the referral called in by our teacher? I can't even go there.

I can however, go on about real numbers if these cuts go forward. We are talking about thousands of children statewide being impacted by triaging referrals, cutting best practice programs and having significant delays in service delivery in programs we are mandated to deliver. Forty-two thousand, seven hundred thirty five (42,735) fewer families would receive family maintenance services and 32,967 children fewer children would reunify with their families.

Welfare Directors are not naive about the importance of good fiscal management. Many counties have stepped up to overmatch the program by 170 million dollars over and above what we are required to spend. Not all counties can afford to do that however. We have no problem being given the responsibility to produce positive outcomes for our children and to be held accountable for our work but please don't make this anymore difficult than it is by going forward with the proposed budget cuts in a program that everyone, including yourselves has acknowledged as underfunded.

In closing I have shared a number of statistics and projections of impact. Even sharing those probabilities scares me. I speak for all of my fellow directors and all of our staff when I say we didn't come into this field of work without a strong sense of obligation to the children we are asked to protect but it is more than just a safety issue. It is about safety, permanence and well being.

When we make the gut-wrenching decision to bring a child into this child welfare system of ours it is always first about safety but then it turns into much more. It is about promising that child that their life will be better with us during the time they stay. It is a promise we will keep them connected to their family and their community. We will honor their cultural diversity. We will provide them a family that will nurture them, keep them

safe and care. We will make it a priority to meet their physical and mental health needs. We will support their education and advocate for their right to excel and if for some very tragic reason they cannot go back to the home from which they came we will promise them permanence and a life long sense of connection to individuals who love them.

We cannot look at a child and not keep these promises. We need your help