

**Statement of Dianne Edwards, Director
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**On behalf of the
County Welfare Directors Association of California**

**Select Committee on Foster Care
California State Assembly**

**Overview Hearing on the Foster Care System
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Good afternoon, Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Select Committee. I am honored to be here today to give the county perspective on California's child welfare system. I am Dianne Edwards, Director of the Human Services Department in Sonoma County. I am a past president of the County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA), have chaired the organization's Children's Services Committee for the past two years and currently serve on the CWDA Executive Committee.

We very much appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony to this Select Committee at the first of several hearings you will hold in the coming months. The formation of a Select Committee on child welfare is timely. Nothing is more important than the safety and well-being of the children in our communities, and as you will hear today, many efforts are underway to improve the child welfare system. On behalf of the programs that seek to help abused and neglected children and their families, we welcome and support your focus on improving the system. Public and legislative attention is crucial to ensuring that we local practitioners have the resources that are necessary to improve the lives of abused and neglected children.

California has the largest, most diverse and most complex child welfare system in the nation. We receive about half a million reports of abuse and neglect each year, and even with declining foster care placements over the past few years, we still have more than 80,000 children in out-of-home care, about 40 percent of them with relative caregivers. Thinking about not only keeping tens of thousands of children safe at any given moment, but also ensuring that their lives are better for having come into contact with the child

welfare system, can be daunting. From the front lines, I want to express our optimism about the prospects for real and lasting reform of child welfare services in California. Many challenges stand in our path, and it will take a concerted effort on the part of your committee, your fellow legislators, other policymakers and society as a whole to overcome these obstacles. Still, a number of important building blocks are in place. Recent county, state and legislative initiatives have led to an unprecedented consensus regarding how the system should be reformed. There is a wealth of energy, creativity and commitment within counties and with our service partners. Broad, inclusive county-level assessments have identified our strengths and areas for improvement. As a result of all these initiatives, many positive changes are being implemented. Every county has a plan for change, and we can track improvement via quarterly, county-specific data reports. For the first time, the system is focused on data and results, not anecdotes and process.

We are all agreed on the outcomes we seek: We want children to grow up in safe, nurturing homes. We want their parents and other caregivers to be supported and well-trained. We want foster youth to have better transitions to adulthood, with permanent connections to caring adults. As we move down this path, however, a number of roadblocks stand in our way. Some are federal; many are at the state level. Because of these barriers, we have only been able to implement new programs on a small scale – in part of a county, with a few social workers who are given smaller caseloads than the rest – rather than systematically and statewide. Unless we work together to overcome these barriers, we will not achieve the results that our children and families deserve. Today I will give you an overview of our accomplishments so far and some ideas for how to move past the challenges we face. We look forward to working with you to identify opportunities for the members of this committee to help overcome these roadblocks and continue our progress toward child safety, permanence and well-being.

The Building Blocks for Reform

Over the past several years, counties have undertaken a number of efforts to improve the child welfare system, in partnership with the state, philanthropic foundations and their communities. All of these efforts can inform this committee's work and help to identify

the actions that would be needed to bring the most promising programs to scale statewide.

Oversight and Accountability: Focusing on Results

The most promising vehicle for reform is an accountability system enacted by the Legislature in 2001, contained in AB 636 by then-Assemblyman Steinberg. We have embraced the implementation of this statewide oversight and accountability framework aimed at achieving measurable results for children and families. This forward-thinking legislation shifted the entire system from focusing on process to focusing on results, probably the biggest single change in state child welfare practice in decades. Each county's performance is now measured and monitored on a range of outcome measures related to child and family safety, permanency and well-being. The purpose is to require continuous improvement in each county, promote interagency partnerships and enhance the public reporting of outcomes.

Some of the major requirements of AB 636 include:

- Quarterly data reports for each county, measuring performance on several outcomes related to child safety, permanency and well-being.
- County peer reviews that use qualitative information not measurable through data to identify both best practices and areas for improvement.
- County self-assessments, undertaken with a broad group of community stakeholders, that analyze current practice and performance.
- County-specific system improvement plans that detail the steps each county will take to improve its child welfare performance, guide implementation of these changes, and monitor results.

All counties are now receiving the data reports, have completed their initial self-assessments and have established system improvement plans. For the current fiscal year, the Legislature and Governor also agreed that funding was necessary to help counties begin implementing their plans. While the amount of funding made available was limited, it nonetheless recognized the need for additional flexible resources to support our efforts, and we very much appreciate that recognition. We sponsored a companion piece to the

original legislation this year, AB 363 by Assemblywoman Chu, which established guidelines for allocating these funds.

Importantly, AB 636 also recognized that while our communities may have different needs, counties still can learn from one another. This is why the law provides for peer case reviews, a process in which teams of workers from other counties, along with state staff, cross county lines to review case files. They target areas where a county has self-identified a need for improvements and help design strategies to boost performance in those areas. About one-third of the counties have gone through the first round of peer reviews.

Counties have been receiving quarterly data reports since early 2004. While it's too early to see the full impacts of the changes we have undertaken since that time, we do see some promising trends in the data. For example, the likelihood of children entering foster care is decreasing. We saw a 6.6 percent reduction in the incidence of children entering foster care from 2000 to 2004, despite a 3.4 percent increase in the state's child population over that time. When children do enter care, they now exit more quickly. We have experienced a 16 percent increase in timely family reunifications, and a 59 percent increase in timely adoptions, from 2001 to 2004. Other measures show a need for continued improvement, and at the state level and in individual counties, we are now able to target our practice changes based on these indicators. Over time, counties will be able to track additional trends in their data, both positive and negative, and adjust their strategies accordingly.

As we implemented the statewide accountability system, we learned that while counties are unique, there are some common themes in the self-assessments and system improvement plans that can inform the Legislature, the Administration, county boards of supervisors and other policymakers. Assemblywoman Chu's AB 363, signed by the Governor earlier this year, also requires the state to provide information to the Legislature on an annual basis regarding these common themes. The Child and Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC) is preparing a report, scheduled for release in June 2006, that synthesizes information and data from county System Improvement Plans to identify

the resources counties need to fully implement their plans. We hope this report will not only keep you informed on our progress, but will also help identify areas where legislative and budget action may be needed in order for children and families to fully benefit from the changes that are being made.

One of the additional next steps for AB 636 is to develop the well-being outcomes that counties will be measured against. The group that implemented AB 636 started with a set of federal measures in the areas of safety and permanence and developed some additional, enhanced measures in both of these areas. However, no federal well-being measures have been developed, so we are forging new territory. The workgroup has developed a set of conceptual outcomes, and a technical group is now determining what data are needed in order to begin measuring county performance on these outcomes.

Moving Forward Locally

The AB 636 accountability system built on a number of successes that counties, legislators, advocates and the state have achieved over the past decade. These efforts demonstrate just how much we can achieve when counties, CDSS, the Legislature and local communities work together to target issues of concern.

One such example is the Adoptions Initiative. During the 1990s, counties received increased funding for their adoption programs so they could hire more staff to work through a growing backlog of children awaiting adoptive homes. With these additional staff, a collaborative effort at the state and local levels, and changes that streamlined the adoption process, the number of children adopted from long-term foster care more than tripled. California received multiple federal awards for improving the number of children adopted each year. Unfortunately, in 2003, the state cut the funding for this program by more than 25 percent. The number of adoption workers has since decreased, the number of children adopted each year has also decreased and we have not received incentive funds from the federal government since the cuts took effect.

Another example is the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payment Program, or KinGAP, sponsored by CWDA, advocate groups and the Wilson administration and authored by

then-Senator Bruce McPherson. In 1997, California became the first state to provide financial support to relatives who take guardianship of children. KinGAP recognizes that many children are essentially in stable, permanent placements with relatives, but are not likely to be formally adopted. More than 15,000 children have exited foster care to safe, permanent homes with relative guardians. California is one of just a handful of states that provides these guardians with stipends. We implemented our program using CalWORKs funds, because the federal government still does not subsidize guardianships – even though they result in a net savings to the foster care system. The Pew Commission on Foster Care recognized our state as a leader in this area.

A number of other model programs have been implemented on a smaller scale, many of which are showing promising results. These changes are generally limited in scope, sometimes targeting individual neighborhoods, other times limited to a few social workers who are given smaller caseloads so they can spend more time working closely with families, extended family members, and children. A hallmark of these strategies is that they typically involve not just the local child welfare agency, but other county agencies, community-based organizations, the philanthropic and business communities, and the families and children we are serving.

Family to Family is one example of a program that is getting individual neighborhoods involved in the safety and well-being of children and families. This initiative was begun by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and involves very targeted efforts to bring neighborhood leaders, community- and faith-based organizations together with local child welfare agencies to strengthen the network of families available to care for abused and neglected children in their own communities.

Other programs are being implemented on a similarly small scale, such as family group conferencing, parent mentor programs, intensive transitional programs for emancipating youth, caregiver recruitment and retention programs and post-adoption services. Counties are doing what they can to implement these programs with as many families as possible, within existing resources. A number of counties have put in their own funding to offset underfunding from the state and federal levels – about \$100 million a year, on

average, above what they would otherwise be required to spend. However, all of these promising practices are labor- and resource-intensive, and additional funding would be needed to bring them to scale throughout a given county or to implement them statewide.

A Consensus for Change

As the committee embarks on its journey to improve child welfare, one advantage that you have is a strong stakeholder consensus on the most promising strategies for successful statewide reform. This consensus comes from the 65-member Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group, created in 2000, which reviewed the entire child welfare system and developed a broad set of consensus-based recommendations. This diverse group included county directors, advocates, legislative staff, foster parents, foster youth and national experts.

The Stakeholder group met over a three-year period, examining the system in-depth and reviewing a series of programs being implemented not just in select California counties, but throughout the country. The end product was a set of consensus recommendations for improving child welfare services in California, which included a number of new, strategic approaches to child safety, permanence and well-being, as well as a focus on accountability throughout the system. Many of the suggestions in this testimony are drawn from the work of these 65 stakeholders, which still rings true today.

Creating a Learning Laboratory

Eleven counties are helping to develop and field-test a series of targeted improvements to child welfare programs and practices, using the recommendations from the Stakeholder group. These counties are working with CDSS on three strategies:

- Developing one standardized approach to assessing the safety of children, and the potential risk to their safety if they remain in their homes, when the county receives a call regarding child abuse or neglect. This approach has been rolled out countywide in the 11 pilot counties, and is designed to ensure that situations are evaluated consistently and objectively from county to county and child to child.

- Improving our response to reports that do not meet the standards for abuse or neglect, but may be headed down that road in the absence of early intervention. This promising change, known in the child welfare field as “Differential Response,” enables counties to respond in a much broader way to the more than 500,000 calls we receive each year. Many of the calls do not, at that point, rise to the level of abuse or neglect where the county child welfare agency would traditionally intervene. However, data show that a substantial percentage of these families come back to us again, after abuse or neglect has occurred, if we do nothing to help them early on. This is the catalyst for Differential Response, which has been implemented on a small scale in the pilot counties due to the need to evaluate its effectiveness and because of resource limitations.
- Promoting permanent family connections for current and former foster youth and helping these youth become healthy, successful adults. The 11 pilot counties have developed more effective, team-based decision-making processes that include extended family members and other caring adults and incorporate the wishes of children and youth. This is based on the idea that better decisions can be made with a team, rather than one individual, and result in more stable placements for children. These new processes are not being used with every case, as they are extremely time- and labor-intensive. Instead, the 11 counties have used their limited funding to implement them on a small scale, and will be reviewing their effectiveness as time goes on.

How You Can Help Improve the System

The child welfare system is improving, driven by the AB 636 outcomes and accountability system and the broad consensus for change developed by the Stakeholders group. As you go forward with your work as a committee, these two initiatives provide a firm foundation for you to build upon. Many of the existing model programs, as well as the learning laboratory of the 11 pilot counties, will provide more valuable information about how to help children remain safe, to make permanent connections for youth and to ensure the well-being of vulnerable families in our communities.

If we are to achieve the results we all seek, there are some barriers that simply have to be addressed. These gaps in the system were identified by the Stakeholder group, and they remain the unfinished business of that consensus process. These gaps must be filled in order for us to have any hope of bringing the best knowledge to bear and delivering the best services possible to children and families, not just in the small-scale programs that counties are able to operate within existing resources, but throughout the state.

- Resources are Needed for Prevention and Early Intervention. Although the child welfare system was not created for this purpose, we have become the first and last resort for a growing number of the overstressed, fragile families in our communities. Society has not kept pace with the growing need for early intervention services that can help a family heal, before their problems erupt into a full-blown crisis of abuse or neglect. Unfortunately, the funding that county child welfare agencies receive for these types of services is completely inadequate. Ironically, federal funds for foster care placement cannot be spent on the services that would keep children out of foster care in the first place. If we are to be the system that serves these families, we need the resources to help rebuild the community-based services that have been on the decline for years. We also need more funding for services to families who are in the child welfare system already. We receive a small, capped allocation of flexible funding for services from the federal government each year, and generally spend all of these dollars within the first quarter. This leaves counties to cobble together what we can from local resources for the rest of the year. Unfortunately, other programs and agencies often do not prioritize our children and families. As a result, it can be very difficult for us to help families address educational, behavioral health and housing needs, and other issues that arise. Without the creation of statutory expectations for those other systems, where today there are none, we will not be able to achieve the results that all of us seek for foster children and their families.
- Social Workers Need Reasonable Caseloads. A legislatively mandated workload study released in 2000 found that our social workers' caseloads were twice as high as they should be to meet even minimum practice requirements. While the

study recommended that workers be responsible for 10 to 15 children, California's funding provides for 30 to 55 children per worker – more than three times the recommended caseloads. In order to provide the care, support and attention that each family deserve and each child needs to thrive, we must be able to do good, quality social work and spend the time necessary with each child and family. Social workers who have the time, because they have reasonable caseloads, can work closely with fragile families to help put them back together again, to ensure that each child is doing well in school, making friends and going to the doctor for check-ups, to stop by the foster home regularly, to ensure that substance abuse treatment is working for the parents. A social worker who must work with 55 families each month doesn't have the time to do all this. We can marvel at the good social workers who make a difference despite all the odds against them, but a better approach is to give families and children a social worker who is not overburdened, and who has the time to work with them to achieve good, lasting results.

- Youth Emancipating From Care Need More Help. In our efforts to improve the system for tomorrow, we must not overlook the youth growing up and transitioning out of the system today. It is completely unrealistic to assume that a child is ready to be independent at the age of 18, yet that is what our state does for the vast majority of youth who emancipate each year. Luckily, we do not have to reinvent the wheel; we have several existing programs for these youth, ranging from independent living programs to transitional housing programs, that are quite simply underfunded. The independent living program (ILP), for example, helps foster youth learn such basic skills as how to apply for college or a job, how to balance their checkbook and do the laundry. The best ILP programs are good because the counties put in their own money and beg donations from the business community. We estimate that it would take \$5,000 per youth, per year to fund the best practice standards developed in 2001 at the direction of the Legislature. So you know just how far we are from that level of funding, we receive less than \$1,000 per eligible youth in our annual allocations, and the total amount of ILP

funding has actually decreased in each of the past four years even though we are seeing an increased demand for these services statewide.

On a broader scale, employment and higher education opportunities should be more readily available for our emancipating youth. We believe the state should pay to support these youth until they are at least 21, not necessarily as dependents of the juvenile court but by giving them comprehensive aftercare services, supportive housing, education and employment assistance, and a shoulder to lean on in times of need. We should provide free tuition, books and living expenses to any foster youth who goes on to higher education. We should hold schools accountable for preparing our youth, by requiring them to keep track of the academic achievement of our youth separately from the broader population of students and by expanding programs that work such as Guardian Scholars and Foster Youth Services. We should require that employment and housing programs put our youth at the head of the line and make sure they can readily access mental health and substance abuse treatment. State leadership – your leadership – is required to demand that level of prioritization for our children and families in these other systems where they so often seek assistance.

- Children Need Safe, Loving, Permanent Homes. While social workers see children in foster care as often as possible, their caregivers see them every day. For children who cannot be reunited with their parents, nothing is more important than finding them a loving, permanent home, preferably with a relative or extended family member, or with an adoptive parent or foster home. While these resource families are the cornerstone of an effective child welfare system, California's efforts to recruit, train and support caregivers is far from adequate. We need a formal recruitment campaign to find more quality caregivers across the state, we need to train these caregivers better, and we need to support them by providing funds for child care, giving them respite care when they need a break and paying them more appropriate rates. Excellent but poorly funded efforts like the Kinship Support Services Program should be fully funded statewide. Ensuring

that county social workers have small enough caseloads to monitor the care that children receive and are able to quickly respond to problems also is a must.

Adoptive parents need our support, even after an adoption is finalized. Under the best of circumstances, most children experience adjustment problems when adopted. Not only must they adapt to their new families and their new physical and social environments, but they must also deal with emotional issues relating to their often-turbulent backgrounds and their feelings of separation from their birth parents or other caregivers. There are effective models for services to these children and families that California should implement.

In conclusion, I want to thank you again for taking on these truly important issues. We want to ensure that legislators, policymakers and the public understand that the children in our system are all of our responsibility. We are committed to doing all we can within our power to get the best results for these children and their families.

The efforts now underway throughout the state offer great hope for substantial, systemwide improvements. To fully implement these promising changes, however, we need your legislative leadership and your willingness to place a priority on our children and families. We need your help to make the needed statutory and fiscal changes at the state level and to advocate for the removal of the many barriers at the federal level. We need more services for early intervention, more reasonable caseloads for social workers, better services for emancipating youth and better recruitment, training and support for caregivers. If we all work together to overcome these roadblocks, we can achieve long-lasting, comprehensive reform and, most importantly, ensure that families and children get the results they deserve.