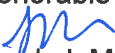




CWDA

February 27, 2014

To: The Honorable Shirley Weber, Chair
Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 1

Honorable Members, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 1
From: 
Frank J. Mecca, Executive Director

**RE: Child Welfare Services: Foster and Kinship Care
Recruitment, Retention and Support Funding**

The County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) respectfully requests your consideration of a budget item to establish a Foster Parent and Kinship Care Recruitment, Retention and Support fund. The fund would be administered through local child welfare services (CWS) agencies and would be dedicated to the recruitment, retention and support of relative caregivers and licensed foster parents so that they may provide stable, loving homes for children in the foster care system.

County child welfare agencies protect and serve over 53,000 children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect through the State's foster care system. CWS is required by law to first consider placement with relatives and if unavailable, next with licensed foster parents. These family caregivers help foster children overcome their abuse and trauma in a supportive environment. Relatives receive the highest priority for placement to help the foster child maintain connection with their family and community, and often are able to maintain sibling groups together while in care. Relatives and licensed foster parents often provide a permanent home through adoption or guardianship when foster children cannot safely return home.

Although foster care caseloads have dropped by nearly 40% since 2003, the loss of relative homes and county licensed foster care homes has outpaced this decline. Specifically, between 2003 and 2013, counties have lost over 50% of its licensed foster family homes, while placements with relatives have increased slightly over this time, with 36% of all children now placed with relative caregivers. Meanwhile, reliance on foster family agencies, which are intended as alternatives to group home placements, has increased in large part due to the additional funding those agencies receive for administration, recruitment and retention. Yet licensed foster parents and relatives are caring for the same foster children who often have special medical, emotional and psychological needs.

Lack of adequate supports for kin and licensed foster parents discourages new families from fostering and hurts counties' ability to recruit and retain high quality caregivers. Without adequate supports, these foster caregivers can easily become overwhelmed with their caregiving responsibilities, which can lead to placement disruptions and other poor outcomes for foster children, including placements into institutions such as group homes, which are much more costly for tax payers and less desirable for children.

Only \$1.9 million State General Funds was allocated to counties for foster parent recruitment, retention and support activities prior to realignment of the child welfare and foster care programs in 2011. To address this growing need, CWDA proposes a funding augmentation of \$6.75 million State General Funds, which can be matched to federal Title IVE funds.

These funds will provide much needed supports for foster and kin caregivers, and importantly for the children in their care. Specifically, the funding would enable counties to address local needs through the following activities:

Targeted recruitment efforts: Counties strive to keep children connected to their community to minimize trauma for children coming into care. In addition, counties are required by federal and state law to maintain foster children in their schools of origin when it is in the best interests of the child. Counties need a deep and broad pool of foster families so that foster children can be matched to families who can meet their unique needs, for example, some foster parents prefer older youth or sibling groups, while some prefer to mentor and support an LGBTQ foster youth. Targeted recruitment will help improve foster youth outcomes as a result of better matching between foster families and foster children. Foster parents can also serve as ambassadors to assist in targeted recruitment efforts with county staff.

Direct Services and Supports to Foster and Kin Caregivers: Examples of services often requested by foster parents and kin caregivers include respite care, additional training, support to participate in team-based meetings concerning children in their care, and covering one-time expenses such purchasing an extra bed. In addition, this fund can assist foster parents and kin caregivers to pay for activities that will help “normalize” a child’s experience in the foster care system (e.g. participation in school-based activities). Finally, these funds can be used to supplement existing rates for short-term stays to avoid placement into an institutional setting such as a shelter or group home.

Staffing Support: It is important to have dedicated support to provide individualized assistance to caregivers and to address programmatic issues that may deter foster parents and relative caregivers. Some examples include staffing “warm lines” to answer questions about child-specific caregiving issues, creating local policies to promote partnerships and information sharing with foster caregivers about the child’s care needs, and mentoring and coaching to meet children’s special needs.

Foster parents often cite both inadequate reimbursement rates and the lack of supportive services as critical factors in deciding whether or not to serve as a foster parent. Clearly, current levels of support to recruit and retain foster and kin caregivers are inadequate. For relative caregivers who are caring for a non-federally eligible child, this problem is exacerbated as these relatives cannot qualify for a higher foster care grant and can only access a CalWORKs child-only grant. While it is true that a small increase in rates reimbursement rates to these caregivers can help, there is still a need for other supports and services that may benefit all licensed foster and relative caregivers directly, and thus a need for this augmentation.

We thank you for your consideration of this important matter and we look forward to working with you to support our foster parents and relative caregivers of the State’s foster children.

Attachment: CWDA Foster Parent and Kinship Care Support Fact Sheet

CWDA Budget Memo – Foster and Kinship Care Support
February 27, 2014
Page Three

cc: Les Spahn, Office of Assemblymember Roger Dickinson
Gail Gronert, Office of the Assembly Speaker
Chris Woods, Office of the Assembly Speaker
Nicole Vazquez, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 1
Julie Souliere, Assembly Republican Fiscal Consultant
Michael Wilkening, Health and Human Services Agency
Matt Paulin, Department of Finance
Mark Newton, Legislative Analyst's Office
Ginni Bella, Legislative Analyst's Office
Will Lightbourne, Director, Department of Social Services
Patricia Houston, Legislative Affairs, Department of Social Services
Kelly Brooks Lindsey, California State Association of Counties
County Caucus



BUDGET FACT SHEET
Foster Parent Recruitment, Retention and Support

CWDA

Prepared by the County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA)

Purpose:

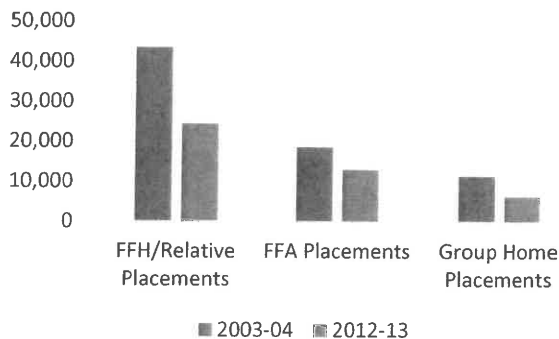
California's child welfare agencies protect and serve over 53,000 children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect through the state's foster care system. Whenever possible, foster children are placed with relatives or other family-based environment capable of meeting the child's needs. Unfortunately, the lack of adequate supports for our kinship and licensed foster parents discourages new families from fostering and hurts counties' ability to recruit and retain high quality caregivers.

Background:

When children are placed into foster care due to abuse and neglect, counties are mandated by federal and state law to first consider placement with relatives, and when a relative placement cannot be found, state law requires that we consider county licensed foster homes as the next priority for placement. Unfortunately counties have seen a steady decline in the number of licensed foster family homes since 2003.

Although foster care caseloads have dropped by 40% since 2003, the loss of relative homes and county licensed foster care homes has outpaced the reduction in foster care caseloads. Specifically, the number of children placed into licensed foster family homes (FFH) and group homes both declined by 44%. Meanwhile, placements with foster family agencies (FFAs'), which are private, non-profit agencies that receive funding to recruit, certify, train and support their foster parents, has seen a much smaller decline (30% since 2003).

Placement Changes FY 2003-04 to 2012-13



Federal and state policies prioritize placements with relatives and county licensed foster parents yet these family caregivers receive the least amount of support to care for abused and neglected children. County-approved relatives and licensed foster parents receive a board and care payment that covers the basic costs of caring for a child including: housing, food, clothing, and other ancillary costs. Some families may qualify for a supplement if the child has behavioral or medical needs. Support to these kin and foster parents is very limited, even though they typically care for the same children with complex trauma, medical and other needs as those served in foster family agencies and group homes.

Greater Supports Will Improve Child Outcomes:

Dedicated funding for recruitment, retention and support of foster parents is woefully inadequate and has been stagnant for over a decade. Only \$3.1 million (total funds) is available statewide for kin caregiver and county licensed foster parent support. Research and experience have shown that lack of caregiver support significantly contributes to caregiver turnover. With turnover, foster children are more likely to experience placement disruptions and are less likely to achieve desired outcomes of adoption or guardianship with a permanent family.

Research also shows that increased support to relatives and foster caregivers can improve outcomes for children in the foster care system. Many promising and effective strategies exist to recruit and retain these loving families. Some examples include: targeted recruitment in communities so that foster children have continuity with their schools and communities, having foster parents and relatives serve as ambassadors for recruitment and peer support, offering coaching and mentoring to foster parents, supporting foster parent participation in team decision-making meetings, and providing respite care.

In addition, foster parents are expected to “normalize” the foster child’s experience by supporting the child’s participation in extra-curricular activities, such as sports and dances, which are not currently factored into the foster care rate. Older youth in particular incur additional expenses such as graduation pictures, school projects, test fees, and other activities as they prepare for emancipation. For very young children, the added costs of diapers and wipes, infant formula, and clothing can strain a family’s budget. For children just entering care, foster parent recruitment is critical to ensure there are adequate emergency placement beds to immediately place children who must be removed into temporary homes while the child is assessed and the child can be matched to the most appropriate home.

Proposed Solution:

Increase support for kinship and foster parent recruitment, retention and support by \$13.5 million total funds (\$6.75m GF). These funds would provide direct support to foster children placed with kin caregivers and foster parents and would increase child well-being through participation in normalizing activities for youth in care. The proposal would also reduce reliance on shelter and other institutional care settings through increased availability of emergency foster home beds.

For More Information:

Frank J. Mecca, Executive Director
(916) 443-1749, fmecca@cwda.org

Libby Reiter Sanchez
CWDA Legislative Consultant
(916) 213-1440, sanchezadvocacy@gmail.com