



March 26, 2014

To: The Honorable Reginald B. Jones-Sawyer, Sr., Chair
Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 5
Honorable Members, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 5

From: Frank J. Mecca, Executive Director

RE: Legal Representation for Children in the Dependency

The County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) requests your support for additional state funding to ensure that California's abused and neglected children are provided with the quality legal representation they deserve. Without a manageable caseload even the most dedicated and highly skilled attorneys cannot meet the demanding and complex needs of California's most vulnerable children.

When a child is removed from her home because of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, the state of California assumes the role of a legal parent and local child welfare agencies are entrusted with the care and custody of these children. County child welfare works in partnership with the courts, attorneys, care providers and others to meet desired outcomes of safety, permanency and well-being for foster children. Through the Dependency Court, critical decisions are made that will have long-lasting implications on the child's life and future – i.e. whether the child will ever return to his/her parents, whether the child will be placed with siblings, and what services the child will receive.

Given the impact of these decisions, it is critical that children have a competent and dedicated attorney to represent and advocate for their protection, safety, and physical and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, the current budget allocation is insufficient to support appropriate representation of children in the dependency system. Children's attorney's represent on average 250 clients per year, far above the recommended American Humane Society optimal standard of 77 clients and maximum of 188 clients per attorney. The results of inadequate funding for attorney's can be devastating for children. Inadequate funding can impede services to children and families and may result in delays in court hearings, all of which undermines county child welfare's efforts for improved outcomes for children, such as reunifying children with their families, placing children with siblings, and finding a permanent home through adoption or guardianship.

For these reasons, CWDA supports the requested \$33.1 million increase in the line item allocation for Court Appointed Counsel, which will allow every county to meet the recommended maximum of 188 clients per lawyer. Thank you for your consideration.

cc: Gail Gronert, Office of the Assembly Speaker
Chris Woods, Office of the Assembly Speaker
Marvin Deon, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 5
Allan Cooper, Assembly Republican Fiscal Consultant
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