

2021 Key Child Welfare Policy Issues



California assumes legal responsibility for abused and neglected children and youth when we remove them from their homes. The state must meet the needs of children and youth in foster care and ensure their safety, stability and success. In 2021, the Legislature should consider and act on a variety of critical child welfare issues that have the potential to support their well-being and help them heal and thrive, including:

Housing - Despite the extension of foster care up to age 21, many young people still face homelessness and deep poverty as they transition to adulthood and even while participating in extended foster care. The added stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis have further exacerbated this problem. The Legislature should: 1) extend the Housing Navigator program to reduce homelessness among young people, including those participating in extended foster care; and 2) provide \$100 million for the acquisition, leasing, construction and rehabilitation of sites to create housing for young people currently or formerly in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or under probation supervision.

Educational Supports and Services - Students in foster care face unique challenges that can disrupt their learning and impair their overall educational experience and achievement. Policymakers should: 1) strengthen accountability by requiring school districts to be more transparent in their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) with respect to the targeted services and supports they provide to their students in foster care; 2) require local educational agencies (LEAs) to report how they are spending supplemental and concentration grant funds, including how much of these funds are directed to students in foster care; and 3) support the expansion of the data the state collects and shares on foster youth, including the number of school transfers they experience each year, in order to better meet the needs of students in foster care.

Learning Loss - The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures have further exacerbated the unique challenges students in foster care faced long before the pandemic and now put them at even greater risk of falling behind in school. The Legislature should ensure: 1) students in foster care have the technology and connectivity they need to fully engage in distance learning; 2) resources are available to provide students in foster care with supports to mitigate learning loss and help them succeed academically; and 3) caregivers, who play an important role in supporting youth in foster care in their education, have the additional supports they need to support foster youth in the distance learning environment.

Child Care - Lack of access to child care is one of the top barriers to finding and maintaining stable homes for our youngest foster children. The Legislature should: 1) augment the Emergency Child Care Bridge Program for Foster Children by \$37 million in state funding, including \$28 million for child care vouchers, \$5 million for Child Care Navigators, and \$4 million for trauma-informed training; and 2) continue the extension of the program time limits adopted during the pandemic to ensure children maintain consistent child care until their families can access long-term care through the subsidized system.

Trauma-Informed Supports – Now, more than ever before, children and youth in foster care and caregivers need access to trauma-informed supports as they struggle with the severe stress brought on by the pandemic. The Legislature should: 1) continue to protect the Family Urgent Response System (FURS) in the state budget and prioritize it as a critical resource to address the needs of current and former foster youth and their caregivers during the pandemic and in its aftermath; and 2) monitor implementation planning and progress to ensure the statewide hotline and county mobile response systems launch in early 2021 and that FURS is effectively implemented to provide 24/7 trauma-informed support to preserve the family unit, prevent law enforcement contacts, promote healing, and stabilize placements.

Stability - Caregivers, children, and youth must have access to critical supports that are designed to stabilize placements and strengthen relationships, especially during the pandemic. The Legislature should: 1) ensure the Home-Based Family Care rate structure is informed by a standard assessment of child and youth needs so the appropriate resources are provided to families in their efforts to stabilize children and youth in their homes; and 2) provide additional resources to children and youth in foster care and their caregivers to support placement stability during the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning.

Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First) - Family First, enacted by Congress in 2018, includes a wide range of reforms that have significant implications for the health and well-being of children and families in the child welfare system. The Legislature should ensure: 1) that there is meaningful stakeholder input into the development of the state's five-year Family First prevention plan, that the plan includes a robust array of services, and that the state has a coordinated plan for building the evidence-base for additional prevention programs, especially culturally relevant and responsive programs; 2) monitor implementation planning and proposed legislative proposals to ensure California moves forward with each of the Family First provisions in a family-friendly manner and authentically engages stakeholders in remaining implementation decisions; and 3) ensure the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and Department of Health Care Services continue to closely collaborate and provide clear guidance on how to blend and braid funding.

Disaster Response - The state is legally responsible for meeting the needs of children and youth in foster care, which is particularly critical in the wake of a natural disaster. Yet foster families who have opened their homes to children in foster care do not receive additional funding from the state during times of emergency and rarely receive additional supports and services. The Legislature should establish a statewide Child Welfare Emergency Fund that: 1) supports proactive local/county disaster planning and capacity building to improve services available to assist foster children and youth and their caregivers in the event of a natural disaster; 2) ensures grants and resources are immediately available to disaster-impacted communities to mitigate the urgent needs of foster children and youth and their caregivers; and 3) aids CDSS and Office of Emergency Services' efforts to work with communities to ensure local assistance centers understand the unique needs of foster families and have the capacity to connect foster children and youth and caregivers to targeted services and supports.

For more information, contact Susanna Kniffen at skniffen@childrennow.org.