

Background

Abused and neglected children in foster care need stable and loving family homes in order to heal from the trauma they have experienced. Unfortunately, placement stability can be elusive for our youngest foster children; after a year in care, more than 57% of children age 5 or younger experience one or more moves.ⁱ

Lack of access to child care is one of the top barriers to finding and maintaining stable placements for children in foster care. Many caregivers who want to care for a young child must work, but the stipend they receive to meet the child's basic needs does not include funding to pay for child care. Additionally, foster children may be eligible for state-funded child care programs, however, these programs usually operate at full capacity and have exceedingly long waitlists. These barriers can prevent potential caregivers from opening their homes to our youngest foster children or lead them to ask for the children in their care to be moved to a new home when their ability to work is significantly disrupted and puts their family in financial jeopardy.

In 2017, Children Now worked with a powerful coalition of counties and stakeholders to develop the “Emergency Child Care Bridge Program for Foster Children” (Bridge program) and secure funding for it. The Bridge program provides caregivers and parenting foster youth with vouchers to pay for up to 12 months of child care and connects them with navigators to help them access the subsidized child care system for long-term child care. The Bridge program also provides trauma-informed care training and coaching to child care providers to help them meet the unique needs of children who have experienced abuse and neglect. Recently, the state further recognized the critical nature of consistent child care for caregivers and parenting foster youth by allowing counties to extend the timeline for a Bridge program voucher if the voucher was set to expire during the COVID-19 state of emergency.

While implementation of the Bridge program has been an incredible success, counties are not able to fully meet the needs of all foster families and parenting foster youth. Despite an augmentation to the Bridge program, the existing funding will not cover vouchers for all the families who need them. Also, while navigators are available to help families secure long-term subsidized care, waitlists for openings in the subsidized care system are so long that 12 months is not enough time for some families to find long-term child care, especially for children with exceptional needs.

Next Steps

In the coming year, Children Now will work with child welfare and child care advocates to elevate the need for:

1. An additional \$37 million in state funding for the Bridge program, 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.

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ⁱ Webster, D., Lee, S., Dawson, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Putnam-Hornstein, E., Wiegmann, W., Saika, G., Chambers, J., Min, S., Hammond, I., Sandoval, A., Yee, H., Flamson, T., Hunt, J., Ensele, P., Lee, H., Casillas, E., & Gonzalez, A. (2019). CCWIP reports. Retrieved 8/27/2019, from University of California at Berkeley California Child Welfare Indicators Project website. URL: http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare