

2022 Key Child Welfare Policy Issues



In the coming year, a cross-section of issues must be addressed to help ensure children and youth in foster care find safety, stability, and success. Together, the state, counties, advocates, youth currently and formerly in foster care, and other stakeholders must work to establish effective policies and programs in the following key areas:

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. To meet this responsibility, a statewide Child Welfare Disaster Response Fund should be established that: 1) supports proactive local/county disaster planning and capacity building to improve services available to assist children and youth in foster care 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 children and youth in foster care and their caregivers, including transportation, interim housing, and replacement of essential belongings; and 3) aids California Department of Social Services (CDSS) efforts to work with communities to ensure local assistance centers understand the unique needs of foster families and have the capacity to connect children and youth in foster care and caregivers to targeted services and supports.

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. To address this, the 2021-22 state budget established an 8% set-aside of funds in the Homekey Program (representing at least \$110.2 million in 2021-22 and \$98.8 million in 2022-23) for projects serving youth experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, including youth currently and formerly in foster care through the age of 25. In 2022, it will be important to build on the progress made and for the state, counties, advocates, providers, and youth to collaborate to ensure the Homekey Program meets the needs of youth in foster care experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness.

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. Moving forward, an additional \$48 million in state funding must be provided for Bridge program child care vouchers, Child Care Navigators, and trauma-informed training for child care providers. It will also be important to adopt the extension of the program time limits implemented during the pandemic to ensure children maintain consistent child care until their families can access long-term care through the subsidized system.

Educational Supports and Services - Students in foster care need targeted supports and services to address their unique educational needs. Therefore, it is critical to ensure: 1) stronger accountability for local education agencies (LEAs) by requiring them 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) schools receive adequate funding to meet foster youth's unique educational needs; and 3) legislation is passed to require 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.

Learning Loss - The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures have further exacerbated the unique challenges students in foster care have long faced, putting them at even greater risk of falling behind in school. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure: 1) effective strategies are in place to reengage youth in foster care in school; 2) supports are available for students in foster care participating in in-person instruction; 3) effective reforms are made to independent study for students who continue

to learn from home; and 4) expanded learning opportunities are available to help students in foster care recover from pandemic-driven learning loss.

Family Urgent Response System (FURS) – FURS is designed to provide children and youth currently or formerly in foster care and their caregivers with the immediate trauma-informed support they need when issues big and small arise through a 24/7 statewide hotline and county mobile response systems. It will be critical to ensure: 1) youth, caregivers, and other stakeholders are informed about FURS and encouraged to use this valuable resource; 2) youth and caregiver feedback is gathered and used to inform FURS quality improvement efforts; and 3) FURS is effectively implemented to provide trauma-informed support to preserve relationships, prevent law enforcement contacts, promote healing, and stabilize living situations.

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. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure: 1) California implements Family First in a family-friendly manner with focused attention on reducing racial inequities and disparities in the child welfare system; authentically engages those with lived experience in implementation; and provides families with access to a broad array of prevention services, including culturally-specific programs; 2) federal funding can be fully accessed as quickly as possible; and 3) the California Departments of Social Services and Health Care Services continue to closely collaborate and provide clear guidance on how to blend and braid funding.

Stability - Caregivers, children, and youth must have access to critical supports that are designed to stabilize placements and strengthen relationships. Significant work remains to be done to support children and youth in family homes, including ensuring 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 of children and youth in their home.

Employment – Employment is foundational to youth’s successful transition into adulthood, yet many youth with lived experience in the foster care system struggle to obtain employment that provides a living wage. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure: 1) students in foster care receive targeted educational services and supports to aid their successful transition to postsecondary education and/or meaningful careers; 2) youth receive employment preparation and readiness supports that include meaningful work experience, as prior work experience is an important predictor of later success in employment. Additionally, it will be critical to monitor California’s implementation of its recent federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) waiver; 3) job training and placement programs are trauma-sensitive and prepared to serve youth with foster care experience, including by understanding the challenges these youth may be facing and making an effort to meet youth where they are; 4) youth are connected with the resources they need in order to be able to work, including vital documents, child care, and transportation, as well as the programs they may need to address substance use or possession of a criminal record; and 5) local workforce systems streamline their processes to provide easy access to information and referrals, and enhance their data collection to better support and meet the needs of youth currently or formerly in foster care.

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