

Problem

California faces devastating wildfires every year that displace thousands of people and leave many of them without homes to go back to. Sadly, what was once a rare occurrence has become a recurrent reality in our state. Once the fires are contained and evacuation orders are lifted, victims continue to need resources and support to build and recover after such tragic losses.

While everyone struggles in the face of natural disasters, children and youth in foster care and their caregivers deal with a unique set of challenges after a fire or earthquake. For example, families forced to evacuate may leave their communities and move in with friends or relatives in other parts of the state. For a foster family, this is not always an option; children in the foster care system have a right to consistent and regular visitation with their family members to work towards reunification and/or maintain important relationships. They also have a right to attend their school of origin and often have court hearings or therapy sessions that they are required to attend. Even prior to a natural disaster, children in foster care have experienced multiple traumas and losses, including from COVID-19 disruptions to critical supports and family visitation, both of which are vital to their well-being. When foster families are evacuated or displaced, it becomes extremely challenging to enforce rights aimed at creating stability, nurturing important relationships, and minimizing further disruptions for children in foster care. To mitigate these challenges, foster families and transition age youth in foster care must have access to dedicated resources to help them survive and rebuild.

We cannot ignore the needs of children and youth in foster care, or their caregivers, in the critical moments during and after a natural disaster and before long-term assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) comes through. The state is legally responsible for meeting the needs of children and youth in foster care, however, disaster-impacted children and youth rarely receive the funding needed to cover extra, unexpected costs, including to replace lost belongings, secure temporary housing, or travel to and from a temporary home to appointments and school. Without needed support when resources are stretched thin and emotions are running high, previously stable homes and living situations can sometimes disrupt, causing further trauma and instability for children in foster care.

Solution

The California Legislature should establish a statewide Child Welfare Disaster Response Fund 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.

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