

2023 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 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. It will also be important to ensure 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. Additionally, California Department of Social Services' (CDSS) efforts to work with communities will be critical to ensuring 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.

Independent Living Program (ILP) - California's ILP helps transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care move forward on a path to successful adulthood by providing services and supports in the areas of education, employment, financial skills, and housing assistance. Although ILP has helped many young people, significant barriers exist that prevent them from engaging in and benefiting from ILP as intended. Moving forward, it will be critical to: 1) expand the age eligibility for ILP so that counties serve eligible youth ages 14 up to 26; 2) modernize and standardize the services and supports offered by ILP, while still retaining flexibility for county ILPs to meet the needs of the youth they serve; 3) increase ILP funding overall so that counties can provide more robust services and supports, lower staff caseloads and turnover, and offer more housing support; 4) consider and address the barriers to transition age youth engagement in ILP; 5) focus on the importance of interdependence, by ensuring ILPs make concerted efforts to help youth build and maintain relationships with trusted adults in their lives as they develop self-sufficiency; 6) prioritize building collaborations and relationships within counties to maximize the services and connections that are available for youth, so youth can access services and supports in a more streamlined and centralized way; 7) incorporate youth voice and choice into all ILPs so that the services offered are most relevant to the young people they serve; and 8) ensure programs hire staff with lived experience in the child welfare system or provide other opportunities for young people to connect with individuals with foster care experience so they can benefit from peer mentorship.

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 Homekey Program includes an 8% set-aside of funds (representing \$116 million in 2022-23) for projects serving youth experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, including youth currently or formerly in foster care through the age of 25. In 2023, it will be important to build on the progress made and to ensure the Homekey Program meets the needs of youth in foster care experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness.

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 employers are appropriately incentivized to hire eligible

youth currently or formerly in foster care. An annual tax credit should be made available to employers ranging from \$2,500 up to \$10,000 per youth based on the hours worked. Employers should also be required to pay at least 120% of minimum wage. Eligible youth should include those who spent time in foster care on or after their 13th birthday and are ages 16 to 26, including crossover youth being served by the probation 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 targeted 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.

Healthcare Reforms - Currently, there are a variety of statewide healthcare reform initiatives being developed or implemented that will impact healthcare provision and access for children and youth currently or formerly involved in the child welfare system. The Foster Care Model of Care Workgroup, established as part of the State's California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM) reform effort, developed recommendations that have been incorporated into various reform efforts. Additionally, the California Behavioral Health Community-Based Continuum (CalBH-CBC) Demonstration concept paper and the Medi-Cal Foster Care Strategies document, both released by the Department of Health Care Services in late 2022, outline additional proposals and tactics to better meet the needs of children and youth involved in the child welfare system. Finally, the Health Care Program for Children in Foster Care is expected to transition to a stand-alone program by July 2024 as the Child Health and Disability Prevention Program sunsets. It will be important to have robust and authentic engagement of child welfare stakeholders in the design and implementation of these various initiatives and identification of additional needed reforms; coordination between efforts; and strong oversight and monitoring to ensure the reforms ultimately have their intended impact.

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 continue to be informed about FURS and how it differs from other resources and are utilizing this valuable resource; 2) youth and caregiver feedback is gathered and used to inform FURS quality improvement efforts; and 3) implementation is closely monitored and data on FURS utilization and outcomes is made publicly available on a consistent basis for quality assurance purposes.

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 reforms to the Home-Based Family Care Rate structure to ensure the appropriate resources are provided to families in their efforts to stabilize children and youth in their homes.

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