

Problem

California continues to face increasingly frequent and destructive wildfires, underscoring the ongoing threat these disasters pose across the state. With each new wildfire, thousands of people are displaced, leaving many without homes to go back to, and in need of ongoing resources and support to rebuild 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. For example, while many families forced to evacuate may leave their communities and move in with friends or relatives in other parts of the state, this is not always an option for a foster family. Children in the foster care system have a right to consistent and regular visitation with their family members to maintain important relationships and work towards reunification. They also have a right to attend their school of origin and often have required court hearings or therapy sessions. When foster families are evacuated or displaced, it becomes extremely challenging to create stability, nurture important relationships, and minimize further disruptions for children in foster care, all of which can compound the trauma children and youth experienced prior to the disaster. Wildfires are especially hard on transition age youth who rarely have accumulated savings and may feel alone in getting their immediate needs met and their lives back on track as connections with trusted adults and community partners are suddenly disrupted. To mitigate these challenges, foster families and transition age youth in foster care must have access to dedicated resources to help them recover 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) arrives. While the state is legally responsible for meeting the needs of children and youth in foster care, disaster-impacted children and youth rarely receive the additional 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. Additionally, the state's Child Welfare Services Disaster Planning and Response Unit (DPRU), established to help improve emergency and disaster preparedness, does not directly connect with youth and families in the aftermath of a disaster and has no tangible resources or services to provide to those in need. Without critical support when stress is high and resources are stretched thin, 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 ensures 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. Additionally, the 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.

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