

# 2026 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 who have spent time in foster care, and other stakeholders must work on the following key areas:

**Child Welfare Disaster Response:** The state is legally responsible for meeting the needs of children and youth in foster care, yet disaster-impacted children and youth rarely receive the additional funding needed to cover extra, unexpected costs. To meet this responsibility, a statewide Child Welfare Disaster Response Fund should be established to ensure 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 the 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 their caregivers to targeted services and supports.

**Housing:** While California has made progress in addressing homelessness, too many youth, particularly those with experience in the foster care system, still face housing instability. It is critical to ensure that state-wide housing programs meet the needs of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness, prioritize young people in housing policy, and expand youth-friendly housing options and supportive services. Future efforts should secure dedicated funding and expand opportunities for public agencies and community-based organizations with youth expertise to develop housing and youth-centered projects that support current and former foster youth, as well as youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

**School Stability:** Supporting school stability for students in foster care is crucial to their educational success. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure: 1) school stability for students in foster care is strengthened by keeping youth in their school of origin when it is in their best interest to do so, including by providing transportation and reducing the number of school transfers they experience; 2) county child welfare agencies send timely notice to school districts informing them that students in foster care are moving homes so that school districts can initiate the best interest determination process; 3) school districts convene the best interest determination process in a timely manner to ensure youth are not enrolled in a new school before the process has taken place; and 4) the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) collaborate on making data publicly available to track school stability for students in foster care.

**Tiered Foster Care Rate Structure:** The foster care rate provided to support children and youth in family homes is an important component of ensuring their needs are met and caregivers have the resources to ensure stability. In 2024, the Legislature enacted a new Tiered Foster Care Rate Structure under which it will be important to ensure: 1) the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment tool is utilized appropriately and consistently; 2) caregiver training, support, guidance, and accountability standards match the needs of the children in their care, particularly for children in Tiers 2 and 3 of the rate structure; 3) critical supports, such as enrichment activities, respite care, and transportation, are funded appropriately and are easily accessed as needs arise; and 4) youth in foster care are connected to peer navigators who can help them identify and access supports and activities.

**Youth's Perspectives on Improving Foster Care:** California's foster care system aims to care for children and youth who cannot remain safely at home due to abuse and neglect. Yet, many children and youth struggle while in care – emotionally, physically, and academically. Despite best intentions and efforts, the system often fails the children and youth it is meant to protect. This is in part because many efforts to fix the foster care system do not consider the voice and choice of youth in foster care. In order to identify solutions that work for youth, we need to collaborate with youth to elevate barriers and develop solutions to the challenges they face in the foster care system. Collaborating with youth currently or formerly in foster care is essential to designing and enacting policy solutions that will make a real difference in their lives. Moving forward, we

will continue to partner with youth with foster care experience to identify opportunities to advocate for and implement their recommendations to improve the foster care system. By listening to their input and following their recommendations, we can make impactful changes to the system that will truly benefit youth and help them thrive.

**Stability for Children and Youth in Foster Care:** Significant work remains to be done to create and maintain stability for children and youth in family homes. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure: 1) the creation of a statewide Child Welfare Disaster Response Fund to provide immediate support during natural disasters—including transportation, temporary housing, and replacement of essential belongings—for children and youth in foster care and their caregivers, helping to mitigate disruptions and maintain placement stability; 2) the effective implementation of the changes to the Family Urgent Response System (FURS), which now extends support to families during hotline investigations and to those receiving family preservation or family maintenance services. By reaching families earlier with culturally responsive, community-based support, this expansion helps keep children safely with their families and prevents deeper system involvement; and 3) the strengthening of the Emergency Child Care Bridge Program to ensure its original intent—providing timely child care for eligible children in foster care—is fully realized by allowing Bridge Navigators to submit referrals to make the program more accessible, reduce administrative barriers, and support families in keeping children in safe, stable homes.

**Education Supports and Services:** With appropriate funding and supports, youth in foster care can succeed in school, thrive academically, and graduate adequately prepared for post-secondary education or work opportunities. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure: 1) school stability for students in foster care is strengthened by keeping youth in their school of origin when it is in their best interest to do so, including by providing transportation and reducing the number of school transfers they experience; 2) stronger accountability and transparency for local educational agencies (LEAs) by monitoring the impact of the new requirement in Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) for LEAs with low performing student groups, particularly students in foster care; 3) schools are adequately resourced and providing the targeted services and supports needed to meet the unique educational needs of youth in foster care; and 4) legislation is passed to require LEAs to report how they are spending LCFF supplemental and concentration grant funds, including how much of this funding is directed to students in foster care.

**Healthcare Services:** Access to comprehensive, targeted health care services is imperative to helping children and youth in foster care heal and thrive, supporting stable placements in family homes, reducing the use of congregate care, and ensuring young adults aging out of foster care are able to successfully navigate the transition to adulthood. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure: 1) effective collaboration and coordination among the Enhanced Care Management (ECM) benefit under California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM), the Health Care Program for Children in Foster Care (HCPCFC), the Child Welfare Liaison role within Managed Care Plans, and others involved in health care coordination for children and youth in foster care; 2) the effective formulation and implementation of various state health care reforms with the potential to improve service access and quality for children and youth in foster care, including efforts within CalAIM and the Behavioral Health Community-Based Organized Networks of Equitable Care and Treatment (BH-CONNECT) Initiative and the roll out of the Child Welfare Services-California Automated Response and Engagement System (CWS-CARES); 3) a broad continuum of behavioral health services, including non-traditional therapeutic supports, are universally available and easily accessible to children and youth in foster care on an ongoing basis; 4) statewide solutions are identified and implemented for youth in foster care whose health care is disrupted by moves between and within counties; and 5) cross-system collaboration between child welfare and health and strong cross-system oversight and accountability.

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