



March 20, 2015



FAX: 916-319-2199



RE: Support to Children and Families Provided by Foster Family Agency Social Workers



Dear Chair Thurmond and Members:

California Alliance
OF CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

We are a coalition of organizations urging your support for a \$18.9 million General Fund allocation to bridge the gap between today's critical underfunding of Foster Family Agency (FFA) social work services and implementation of the Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) recommendations. Without that support, FFAs may implode before the promise of CCR can be realized, and children who otherwise could be cared for in home-based family settings will find themselves in group care.



Over 25% of children in California foster care live with FFA certified families. More children are placed with FFAs than in any other non-relative foster care setting. Children, youth, their foster caregivers, birth parents, brothers and sisters, and extended family members rely on FFA social workers for essential supports and services that help assure safety, provide placement stability, maintain family contact, and sustain permanency or reunification efforts.

CHILDREN NOW



CWDA

So successful have FFA social work services been that the final CCR report, *California's Child Welfare Continuum of Care Reform*, recommends significantly expanding the role of FFA social workers to provide services and support to kinship caregiver families upon county request, to actively participate in the Child and Family Teams, and to train and support both Therapeutic Foster Care and Intensive Treatment Foster Care families. Under CCR, FFAs for the first time would be able to deliver, and children and their caregivers would be able to receive, the level of support and services they need regardless of the placement setting.



JOHN BURTON FOUNDATION
FOR CHILDREN WITHOUT HOMES

But FFA social work services have reached a crisis point. The amount built into the current FFA rate for social work services has been frozen since 2001 and was cut an additional 10% in 2009 leaving an astounding 64% shortfall. The rate now supports an hourly wage of just \$15.13/hour for a MSW level social worker, with minimal funding for benefits such as healthcare insurance.



Children and youth come to FFAs having suffered the traumas of abuse and neglect that led to removal from their homes, of enforced separation from their families, and frequently of multiple unsuccessful foster care placements. Many children have significant emotional and behavioral challenges, including self-mutilation, depression, attachment disorder, substance abuse, sexual exploitation or aggression, and conduct disorder.

Foster parents are asked not just to provide food, clothing and shelter, but to love the child, address her emotional and behavioral challenges from a trauma-informed understanding, and to do everything possible to support reunification of the child with her family, even while preparing to adopt her should unification not succeed.

FFA certified families rely on their social workers to stand arm in arm with them and their child, to convey knowledge and offer support, to suggest tools and proffer advice, to answer the emergency call at 1:00 a.m. and provide 24/7 crisis management, to schedule and supervise visits with siblings, parents and other family members, to help secure the right educational placement, and on and on.

Tragically, qualified social workers are leaving FFAs at an alarming rate to take higher paying jobs in health care and the public sector. This exodus leads to grave rates of social worker turnover, the greatest and most negative impacts of which devolve onto the children and foster families who depend on them.

When a social worker exits a FFA for a position that pays a living wage and benefits, continuity and trust between parent and professional is broken, and foster children re-experience the grief and trauma of losing another dependable adult, often occasioning yet another disruption in permanency plans. Equally detrimental, when foster parents feel unsupported or abandoned they are much more likely to give up fostering, further reducing home-based family care alternatives to group care.

While disruptions in foster care relationships cannot be totally avoided, they should not result from a condition so easily remedied as inadequate compensation for social work professionals. But meanwhile, FFA social work vacancies in California go unfilled as the capacity of FFAs to offer competitive compensation erodes daily.

CCR Recommends Increasing FFA Social Work Rate

Recognizing this crisis and the opportunity to better support children in home-based family care, the CCR Report highlights the need to increase the social work component of FFA rates in order to achieve the state's vision of improving the experience and outcomes of children and youth in foster care ***“emphasizing family-based placements by providing appropriate services and supports,”*** and reducing the placement of foster youth in group homes.

Based on over three years of collaborative planning among the Administration; state and county policy-makers; current and former foster youth; and other stakeholders, and released by the Department of Social Services in January 2015, the report includes the following recommendation: ***“to increase the FFA Social Worker Rate to account for expanded core services and supports to be provided to resource families.”***

Governor's Proposed Budget Would Increase FFA Social Work Rate

Accordingly, the Governor's January proposed budget included an allocation of \$4.2 million GF to ***"bolster the social worker capacity of Foster Family Agencies to provide services in home-based family care placements,"*** one of only two required actions in this budget year to kick off CCR implementation.

Unfortunately, this amount falls far short of what is needed. If CCR is to be successful in caring for more foster children and youth in home-based family settings, including the homes of family members, FFAs need to be able to aggressively increase the workforce capacity of their social workers who serve and support those children and families.

Coalition Urges Increase of FFA Social Work Rate

For the reasons outlined above, the undersigned urge the Legislature to allocate \$18.9 million General Fund in 2015-16 to build statewide FFA social worker capacity for serving children in home-based families by increasing the Social Work component of the FFA rate by \$200/month, thereby raising the funded hourly wage for a Foster Family Agency social worker to \$24.47. By increasing just the Social Work component of the rate, the Legislature would ensure that FFAs must use all the funds for social work services and may not use them for any other purpose.

We thank you for your consideration of this important matter and look forward to working with you on behalf of the state's foster children.

Sincerely,

Simone Tureck, Executive Director
Alameda County Foster Youth Alliance

Angie Schwartz, Policy Program Director
Alliance for Children's Rights

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