



January 31, 2014

California Assembly Democratic Caucus  
State Capitol, Room 5035  
Sacramento, CA 94814

**Re: End the state policy of placing foster children into deep poverty**

Dear Democratic Caucus Member:

We are a coalition of California organizations working with children and families who are involved in the child welfare system, or are at risk of such involvement. We are writing to you as a member of the California Democratic Caucus member in response to the recent *Budget for a Responsible Blueprint* recently released by the Caucus.

We strongly support the *Blueprint's* focus on reducing child poverty in California, and we urge you to take a crucial first step towards that goal: *California should change an arbitrary and irrational foster care funding rule that places many foster children living with relatives into deep poverty.*

When a child is removed from home due to parental abuse or neglect, California law prioritizes placement with a relative (rather than a non-relative foster parent), if a relative is able and willing to care for the child. The basis for this policy is that kinship care benefits children by providing continuity, stability and a sense of identity that can help children heal from the traumas of abuse or neglect and removal from home. Over 36% of California's foster children are placed with relatives; they are the backbone of our child welfare system.

Despite the preference for relative placements, California currently provides many relatives caring for a foster child just a fraction of the support that the exact same child would receive if placed in a non-relative foster home. This disparity in financial support has nothing to do with the needs of the child – it is triggered solely by where a child is placed and whether a child meets federal eligibility criteria.

If a child meets federal criteria, the child receives federal foster care benefits. This is because federal law does not allow the state to discriminate between foster children placed with relatives and those placed with non-relatives. However, because the federal criteria are outdated, over half of our state's foster children are not federally eligible.

For non-federally eligible children, California has chosen to provide state-funded foster care benefits only if the child is placed in a non-relative foster home or group homes.

***Relatives caring for a non-federally eligible child do not receive foster care benefits at all***—even though they are required to meet the same stringent licensing standards as all other foster parents. Instead, the relative foster parent can only receive CalWORKs (welfare) benefits, which provides less than half of what the state of California itself has determined to be the minimum necessary to provide for a foster child. This CalWORKs rate is equal to only 37% of the poverty level. Thus, our state *actually removes children from their home and places them into poverty*.

For example, a grandmother who steps up to care for her 15-year-old grandson, if he is not federally eligible, can receive only \$351 per month in CalWORKs benefits – while the same child placed in a non-relative foster home would receive \$820 per month, or more, if he had a disability or special needs. The inequities are multiplied for sibling sets. If that grandmother took in three grandchildren, she would receive only \$714 from CalWORKs – compared to \$2460 per month for the same children in a non-relative foster home.

The failure to adequately support children placed with relatives results in significantly higher costs to the state and counties. Denying adequate funding to relatives sets relatives up to fail. And, when a relative can no longer provide for a youth, particularly the youth with special needs, these youth end up in congregate care where the costs of care skyrocket. It is unrealistic to expect our relatives to provide for a special-needs foster youth on \$4,200 a year when that same youth costs \$102,000 a year when placed in a group home.

This system must be changed by providing the same financial benefit to *all* children placed in foster care, regardless of whether they are placed with a relative or non-relative. California is the only state with this inequitable, two-tiered policy; the other 48 states provide equal support for children placed with relatives if the relative meets the state's licensing standards.

By making this important change, over 10,000 abused and neglected children will be lifted out of deep poverty—and consequently their health, education and employment outcomes will improve and their involvement with the criminal justice system will be reduced. Equally importantly, by making this change, California will be fulfilling the legal and moral responsibility it assumed when it removed these children from their families and placed them into State care.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to continuing this conversation and working together to best meet the needs of California's children and youth in foster care.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Angie Schwartz", is displayed on a light gray rectangular background.

Angie Schwartz, Policy Director  
Alliance for Children's Rights

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