

Understanding Caregiver Perspectives:

Survey on Home-Based Family Care Monthly Rates in Home-Based Foster Care (HBFC) Settings

Background

Before April 1, 2021, most resource parents caring for children and youth in home-based out-of-home care settings received the Home-Based Family Care (HBFC) rate, also known as the Board and Care Rate, along with the county's Specialized Care Increment (SCI), if applicable, which considers the special needs of the youth in their care. The HBFC is a rate paid to resource parents who care for children or youth in foster care in a family setting. As a part of the Continuum of Care Reform effort, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) developed the Level of Care Protocol for use by county child welfare and probation staff as a strengths-based approach for determining Board and Care rates. The protocol matches the individual care and supervision needs of children in foster care with a resource parents' level of support. Starting April 1, 2021, county social workers began using the Level of Care Rate Determination Protocol (LOCP) to identify the monthly rate a caregiver will be paid ([ACL 21-17](#) and [ACL 21-17E](#))

This protocol is intended to use a strengths-based rate method to assess the individual care and supervision needs of the youth and determine a suitable Level of Care (LOC) monthly rate for support. The assessment evaluates the youth's needs in five core domains: physical, behavioral/emotional, educational, health, and permanency, scoring them based on a weighted point system.

The LOCP considers various support activities provided by the resource parents, such as transportation to medical appointments, parent visitation, or extracurricular activities, as well as specialized meal preparation, tutoring, and aid with at-home therapies. If offered by a county, the SCI focuses on factors like the presence of a diagnosis, medication, treatment, or therapy for the youth ([ACL 18-48](#)). In cases requiring immediate higher levels of supervision or medical attention, the Intensive Services Foster Care (ISFC) rate may be applied prior to completing the LOCP assessment.

The LOCP assessment should be completed within 60 days of a child or youth entering foster care, changing placement, experiencing changes in their needs, or when ISFC or Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) ends.

As of July 1, 2023, the monthly Level of Care Resource Family Home-Based Family Care rates are as follows:

Basic: \$1,206

LOC 4: \$1,613

LOC 2: \$1,341

Intensive Services Foster Care (ISFC): \$3,148

LOC 3: \$1,479

Note the rates are updated annually based on updates to the California Necessities Index (CNI) and this survey was conducted referencing fiscal year 2022-2023 rates. The California Department of Social Services issued [ACL 23-65](#) in July 2023 reflecting the CNI increase of 6.85 percent for fiscal year 2023-24 effective July 1, 2023. Additionally, the SCI is calculated by adding the HBFC Basic Rate and the individual county's SCI rate, resulting in the Specialized Care Rate. The rate is county specific. Uniform rates are not state mandated. SCI rates by county are available [here](#).

Caregiver Survey Summary

Background

The Alliance for Children's Rights conducted a voluntary, online survey of caregivers across California in resource families in May and June of 2023. This survey was designed to gather caregiver input as CDSS works on developing an updated HBFC rate structure.

This survey, which focused on obtaining insights into the rate received by the respondents and identifying potential barriers and gaps in funding information and coverage, is intended as a tool to ensure that caregiver perspectives are considered during the revision of the rate structure.

Furthermore, this survey aims to address the importance of caregiver engagement and their firsthand experiences to shape a revised rate structure that better meets the needs of children and youth in foster care and resource families across California. By seeking caregiver input, the Alliance for Children's Rights aims to assist in the creation of a more inclusive and comprehensive rate structure that addresses the challenges faced by caregivers and supports the well-being and stability of youth in foster care.

Respondents:

Eighty-two current and recent caregivers of youth in foster care participated in the survey. To summarize financial support of the respondents, a considerable proportion of respondents receive the Basic rate (39.74%), while smaller percentages receive LOC 2 (11.54%), LOC 3 (5.13%), LOC 4 (7.69%) and ISFC (5.13%).

It is noteworthy that 30.77% of respondents reported having multiple young people with varying rates within a single household (Figure 1). These findings highlight the diverse range of care arrangements and the need for tailored support within the foster care system.

Q1: Please indicate the monthly rate(s) you are receiving for each child in your care regardless of whether the LOCP was conducted for them:

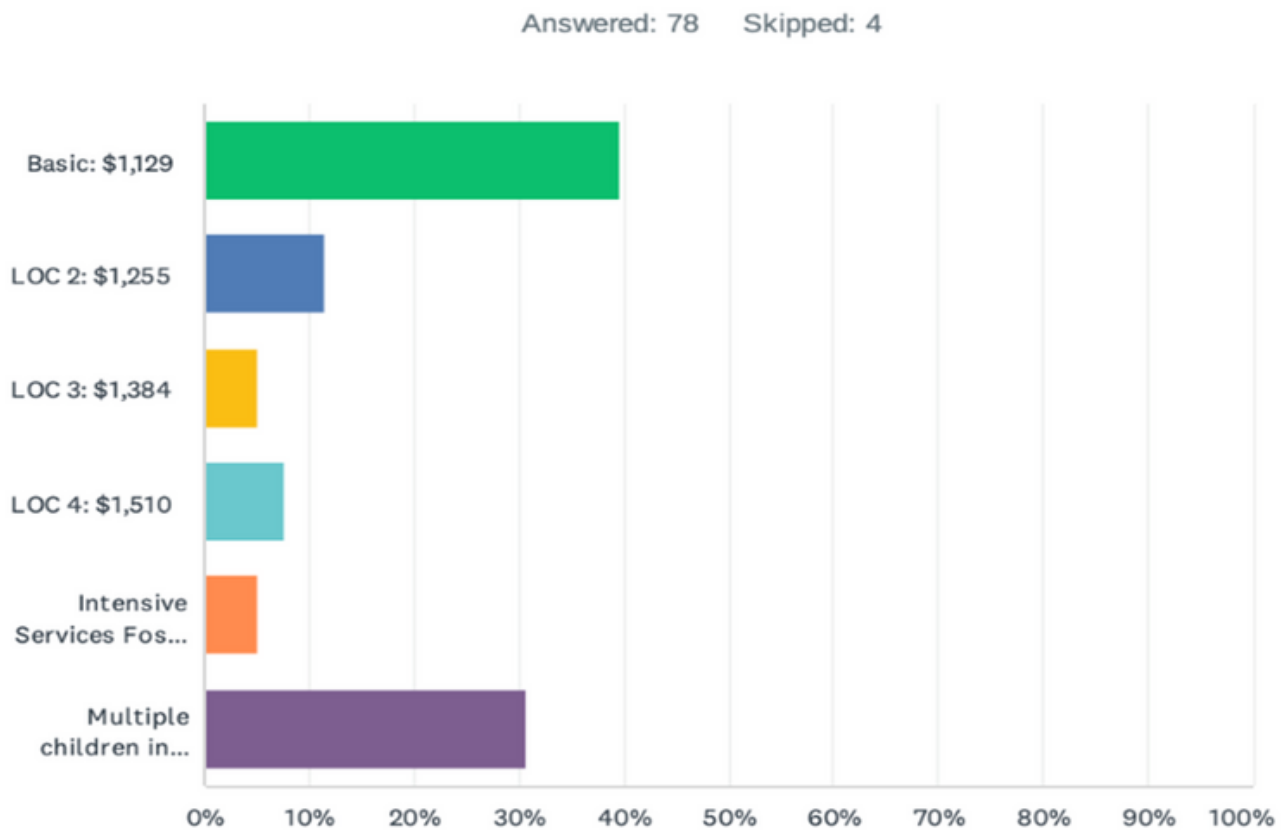


Figure 1: Caregiver Survey Results on Foster Care Home-Based Family Care Monthly Rates

Caregiver Perspectives on Level of Care Protocol Introduction and Appeal Awareness in Foster Care

Q2: Have you had a conversation with your county social worker during which they introduced and explained the Level of Care Protocol?

Answered: 82 Skipped: 0

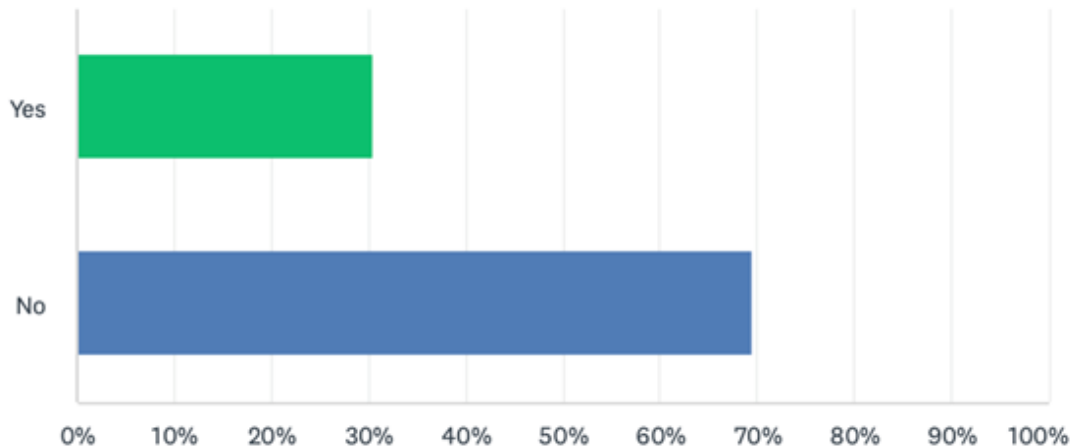


Figure 2: Caregiver Survey Results on Introduction to the LOCP by County Social Worker

Of the 82 respondents, 69.51% (57) reported they did not receive an introduction or explanation of the Level of Care Protocol from their county social worker (Figure 2). Funding for the daily care and supervision of a child is available to all approved, licensed, or certified foster families, including both relatives and non-relatives. A recent change in the law provides funding for emergency caregivers who care for a child placed in their home after July 1, 2018, but before being officially approved as a resource family, to be eligible for foster care funding starting from the moment the child is placed in their home (Cal. Welf. and Inst. Code § 11461.36).

The assessment that determines the LOC rate is based on various aspects of the care resource parents provide to the child, including physical, behavioral/emotional, educational, health, and permanency/family services. The responses to this question underscore the heightened importance of providing comprehensive explanations to caregivers, as a significant majority report they did not receive an introduction or clarification regarding the LOCP. This emphasizes the necessity to address this gap in communication and ensure that caregivers are well-informed about the assessment criteria.

Q3: Are you aware that you can appeal the Level of Care rate determination?

Answered: 82 Skipped: 0

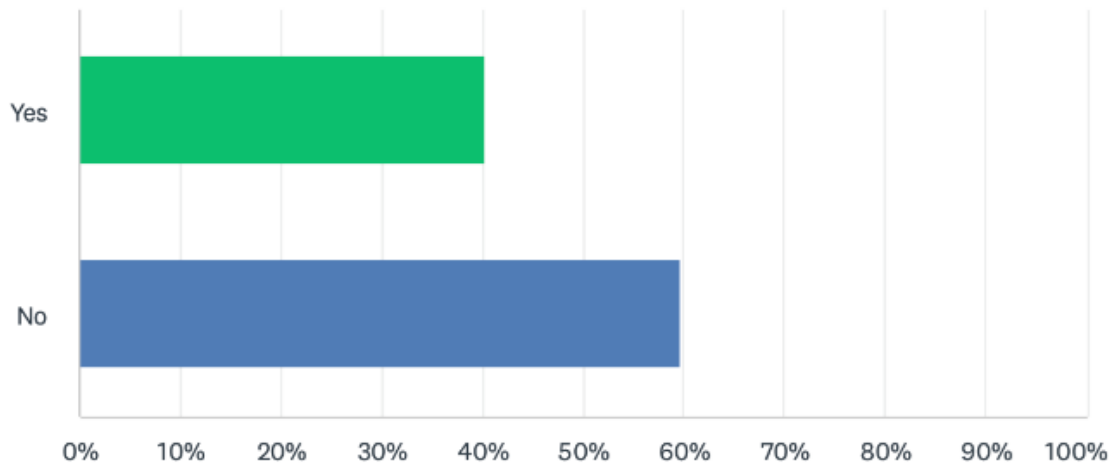


Figure 3: Caregiver Responses to Awareness of LOC Rate Appeal

Moreover, it is worth noting that a considerable percentage of respondents, specifically 59.76%, indicated their lack of awareness regarding the appeal process for the determination of the LOC rate (Figure 3). If a caregiver disagrees with the assessed level of care, they maintain the right to request a reassessment and/or initiate an administrative fair hearing. These avenues of recourse allow caregivers to voice their concerns and pursue a just resolution. Addressing the lack of awareness regarding the appeal process is crucial as it empowers caregivers to actively participate in the decision-making process, ensuring transparency, accountability, and promoting a system that prioritizes the best interests of children and youth in foster care.

It is essential to work toward a system where caregivers clearly understand the LOCP and the avenues available to them to advocate for appropriate funding and support for the children in their care.

Caregiver Perspective on Barriers in Accessing Higher Level Rates in Foster Care HBFC Settings

Q4: What barriers, if any, have you encountered in accessing higher level rates (including LOC 3, LOC 4, ISFC, and TFC) to support the youth in your care?

Lack of Knowledge and Communication:

Fifteen respondents expressed a lack of knowledge and communication regarding the availability of higher rates. Many caregivers were unaware that they could receive a higher rate based on the level of care needed.

Survey respondents reported not being offered or informed about their eligibility for higher rates, and some had not been told about the LOC assessment. Furthermore, caregivers mentioned a lack of information provided by social workers and the need to repeatedly inquire and follow up with social workers to receive an increase. Overall, this highlights the importance of improving communication and providing caregivers with comprehensive information about available rates and assessments. The need to repeatedly inquire and follow up diverts caregivers' attention and energy from the crucial task of providing care for the youth.

Instead of focusing on the well-being and development of the children, caregivers are forced to navigate bureaucratic processes and seek out information that should have been readily provided. This time-consuming endeavor can lead to delays in accessing necessary resources and services, impacting the quality of care provided to the youth.

Challenges in Accessing Higher Rates:

Eleven respondents encountered various challenges in accessing higher rates for the youth in their care. This included difficulties in navigating the process, long wait times, and delays in assessing for and receiving support at higher levels. Some caregivers mentioned hesitation from social workers in submitting requests, while others pointed out barriers in accessing ISFC through Family Foster Agencies (FFAs). Caregivers also reported needing to provide assessments from medical, mental health, and school therapists due to changes in placements of the children and youth from one family to another. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure that caregivers can access the appropriate support and resources to meet the needs of the youth in their care.

By streamlining processes and providing clear guidelines and support, caregivers will be better equipped to ask for the level of funding they need to support the youth in their care and, in turn, provide the highest quality of care to the youth.

Inconsistent Assessments, Rate Determination, and Administrative Issues:

Respondents voiced concerns about inconsistent assessments and rate determinations, highlighting the frustration they experienced when different social workers assigned varying rates for similar situations. They expressed a lack of clarity in the county's decision-making process and felt that rates were not consistently applied.

Disagreements between caregivers and social workers regarding the child's needs and referrals for services further compounded these challenges. These inconsistencies in rate determination create uncertainty and hinder caregivers' ability to understand why certain rates are granted, which can undermine their confidence in the system.

In addition, four respondents identified administrative issues that impeded their access to higher rates. They expressed frustration with excessive paperwork, despite the existence of accessible medical and behavioral needs information from previous foster care settings. Obtaining copies of the completed LOC assessment/scoring sheet from social workers proved to be a challenge, leaving caregivers without a clear understanding of why certain rates were or were not granted. These administrative hurdles contribute to a lack of transparency and hinder caregivers fully comprehending the basis for rate determinations.

Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure fairness, consistency, and transparency in rate determination processes. Streamlining administrative procedures, providing clearer guidelines, and improving communication channels can help alleviate these challenges. Moreover, ensuring that caregivers receive copies of the completed LOC assessments and explanations for rate determinations can empower them with the knowledge and understanding they need to advocate effectively for the appropriate rates that reflect the unique needs of the youth in their care.

Caregiver Perspectives on Critical Need Funding Gaps

Q5: What do you think are the critical needs the current rate does not cover?

"I honestly do not know what it does or doesn't cover."

"The stigma of bringing it up the critical needs not covered as a resource parent, not wanting to be seen as focused on money, [is difficult]."

Category	Number of Responses
Financial support	20
Transportation	7
Specialized care/services	6
Educational needs	5
Respite care	4
Clothing allowance	3
Therapy/ mental health	3
Housing-related expenses	2
Other	15

Figure 6: Self-Identified Categories of Critical Need Funding Requests by Caregiver Respondents

Childcare, Respite, Support and Training for Caregivers:

Several respondents highlighted the need for additional support in terms of respite care and finding suitable caregivers for children with special needs. Respite care and other forms of childcare were the most documented critical need in responses. Respite care refers to short-term, temporary care usually to provide a break or relief for their primary caregivers. It offers caregivers the opportunity to take time off from their caregiving responsibilities, attend to personal needs, or simply recharge. Respite care can be provided by trained professionals, volunteers, or other qualified individuals who can meet the specific needs of the individual requiring care.

Respondents expressed the desire for training programs that can educate family members or relatives on how to address problem behaviors and provide effective babysitting. Additionally, the need for funding to cover childcare expenses, allowing resource parents to take a break and recharge, was emphasized. Respondents also mentioned the challenges of finding activities and therapies that accommodate their children's needs, suggesting the inclusion of tutoring services by professionals who specialize in helping special needs children with issues like non-compliance and emotional regulation.

A common theme among the responses was the need for increased support and training for caregivers. Some respondents expressed frustration with the lack of assistance or guidance from social workers and agencies. They emphasized the importance of specialized training programs for families, especially when dealing with children in ISFC placements who present unique challenges. The need for ongoing support, counseling, and resources to help caregivers navigate the complex needs of the children in their care was also highlighted.

Financial Support and Transparency:

Several respondents expressed concerns regarding financial support. They highlighted the need for funding to cover time off work or a reduction in work hours to attend to the child's needs and appointments. Transparency in financial matters, such as clear guidelines on what expenses are covered, was also identified as an important requirement for caregivers. Notably, one of the respondents stated, "I honestly do not know what it does or doesn't cover." This indicates a lack of clarity and understanding among caregivers regarding the specific coverage and limitations of the current rate structure. It also suggests a need for improved communication and education on the financial aspects of foster care support.

Providing caregivers with clear information and guidelines provides them the opportunity to make more informed decisions and effectively advocate for the critical needs of the children in their care. Addressing these concerns and enhancing financial support can contribute to the overall well-being and stability of both the caregivers and the children in their care.

Time and Transportation:

Several respondents noted the considerable time spent transporting children to and from visits, therapy appointments, and other activities. They expressed the need for support in managing these logistical challenges, suggesting that the current rate does not adequately cover the time and effort involved in fulfilling these responsibilities. Some respondents also mentioned difficulties in attending school meetings and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, which can be time-consuming and require extensive coordination.

Education and Therapies:

“I think it should cover whatever the children are in need of as well as extracurricular activities.”

Respondents highlighted the need for enhanced support in education and therapy. They expressed concerns about the availability and coverage of educational services, tutoring, and therapies that may not be accessible or covered by insurance. Funding for extracurricular activities, additional counseling and training for caregivers, education advocates, and attorneys were also mentioned as critical needs that are currently not adequately addressed by the rate structure.

Other respondents provided unique or unrelated responses that did not fit into the categories identified above. These responses included caregivers managing higher needs personally, resulting in a lower rate qualification, and cases where there was no attempt to access higher rates due to a lack of awareness or necessity. A few responses indicated that certain counties did not share rate information or highlighted variations in rate determination between different LOC workers.

Importance of Clear and Comprehensive Communication about the Monthly Rate

Q8: What do you think is the most essential information that should be communicated to the caregiver about the monthly rate?

Category	Number of Responses
Financial support	20
Transportation	7
Specialized care/services	6
Educational needs	5
Respite care	4
Clothing allowance	3
Therapy/ mental health	3
Housing-related expenses	2

Figure 6: Self-identified Caregiver Response Categories of Essential Information that Should Be Communicated Regarding the Monthly Rate

Understanding Flexibility and Adjustments

Several respondents expressed the importance of understanding the monthly rate and its flexibility. They emphasized the need for clear communication about how the rate can be adjusted as needed to support the child(ren) in their care (22 responses).

It is important for caregivers to understand the flexibility and adjustments that can be made to the monthly rate. This knowledge allows caregivers to advocate for the child's needs while in their care and ensures they have the necessary resources to provide appropriate support. When caregivers are aware of the possibility of rate adjustments, they can address any changes in the child's needs promptly and seek the appropriate level of assistance.

Clarity and Communication

Caregivers also mentioned the need for better communication and support regarding the rate structure. This included understanding the time frame to receive the rate (9 responses) and having the rate clearly laid out at each placement, including how and when to request an increased rate (9 responses).

Clear communication about the monthly rate is essential for caregivers to have a comprehensive understanding of the financial support they will receive. Knowing the time frame to receive the rate and having it clearly laid out at each placement, caregivers can plan their finances and make informed decisions regarding the child's care. Additionally, understanding how and when to request an increase empowers caregivers to advocate for additional support when necessary.

Appeals and Level of Care

Some caregivers expressed a desire for more information on appealing the rate and the purpose of the stipend (7 responses). Others highlighted the need to know why a child is at a specific level of care and what to do if it becomes clear that the level is no longer accurate (6 responses).

Knowledge about the appeals process and the purpose of the stipend is crucial for caregivers to understand when advocating for a proper rate assessment. It allows them to understand their rights and options if they believe the rate is not appropriately aligned with the child's needs. Furthermore, knowing why a child is placed at a specific level of care and what to do if that level needs to be reevaluated helps caregivers ensure that the child's changing needs are accurately reflected in the rate.

Lack of Information and Knowledge Gap

Many caregivers expressed frustration with the lack of information provided about the monthly rate. They mentioned the need for better communication about how the rate is determined, what assessments are done, and what factors qualify for different rates (8 responses). Some caregivers were unsure or had no knowledge of the critical information that should be communicated about the rate (8 responses).

When caregivers lack information or have a knowledge gap regarding the monthly rate, it can create confusion and frustration. Having a clear understanding of how the rate is determined, what assessments are conducted, and what factors influence different rates helps caregivers feel more informed and supported in their role. It enables them to advocate effectively for the child's needs and ensure that they are receiving the appropriate financial assistance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concerns raised by caregivers about the lack of information and communication surrounding LOC rate are critical and require immediate attention. The feedback highlights the necessity for clear and comprehensive communication between agencies and caregivers, allowing them to meaningfully take part in rate discussions. Flexibility in rate adjustments is essential to accommodate the unique need of each child in foster care and the caregivers supporting them.

Caregivers expressed desire for greater transparency and support in the rate determination process emphasizes the importance of empowering caregivers to make informed decisions about the care they provide. When caregivers are involved and engaged, they can ensure the best possible care for children, promoting their well-being and development.

The implications of addressing these concerns extend far beyond the caregivers themselves. The well-being and healthy development of the children in foster care are directly affected by the support and resources provided to their caregivers. By promoting equity for children in foster care and alleviating financial burdens on resource parents, the State can ensure that children do not miss essential childhood activities due to their placement in out of home care.

Counties and service providers must work collaboratively to create an environment that supports caregivers in meeting the diverse needs of the children in their care. This includes supplying accurate and complete information about LOC rates and actively involving caregivers in rate discussions. By addressing these systemic issues, the welfare of children in foster care can be safeguarded, ensuring they receive the care and stability they deserve while in the foster care system. It is a collective responsibility to support and empower caregivers, as they play a vital role in providing safe and nurturing environments for children in foster care.

Recommendations for Policy Makers and Advocates:

1. Improve Financial Transparency: Ensure caregivers have a clear understanding of the financial support they are entitled to and the specific coverage and limitations of the rate structure. Improve communication and education around financial matters related to foster care support, covered expenses, and rate adjustment processes.

2. Improve Communication: Enhance communication channels between social workers and caregivers to ensure that caregivers receive comprehensive information about the rate structure, assessments, and available support. Provide clear guidelines and explanations of the LOCP, assessments and scoring sheets to ensure caregivers understand the assessment criteria and the factors influencing rate determination and the timelines for conducting a LOCP assessment, for example, at initial placement, change of placement, or at the request of a caregiver.

3. Increase Caregiver Awareness: Develop outreach programs and training initiatives to increase caregiver awareness of the LOCP, including the introduction and explanation of the protocol by county social workers and their right to receive a copy of the LOCP assessment scoring sheet. Educate caregivers about their rights, including the option to appeal the LOC rate determination, and provide them with information on how to initiate an administrative fair hearing, if necessary.

4. Pursue Authentic Engagement: Providing information to caregivers that is needed to have effective conversations regarding the LOC rate. When caregivers are provided the information needed to be active participants in these conversations, the gap of knowledge is lessened, and authentic input can be provided.

5. Enhance Rate Flexibility: Communicate clearly to caregivers about the flexibility and adjustments that can be made to the monthly rate. Ensure that caregivers understand the process for rate adjustments and the criteria that determine changes in the rate based on the child's evolving needs.

6. Streamline Processes: Address challenges caregivers face in accessing higher level rates by streamlining processes and reducing administrative burdens. Simplify paperwork requirements, provide clearer guidelines, and establish consistent procedures for rate determination to ensure fairness and transparency.

7. Provide Comprehensive Resources: Recognize and address the critical needs of children and youth in foster care including respite care, additional training programs, specialized services, educational needs, therapy, and counseling. Support caregivers by providing individualized and timely access to support and resources.

8. Provide Individualized Support: Recognize the need for ongoing support and training for caregivers, particularly for those caring for children with higher levels of need including ISFC. Offer specialized training programs, counseling services, and resources that cater to the unique challenges faced by caregivers in providing quality care to children in foster care.

9. Update Information Resources and Training: Inconsistent or incomplete information resources including the CDSS LOCP webpage and the UC Davis webpage should be updated to communicate current and complete information and resources to ensure information is timely and relevant. Additionally, information about the LOCP is included in multiple All County Letters spanning six years. Combining all relevant and current information from the eight letters into one ACL will help ensure greater fidelity in implementation and reduce confusion. As well, social worker trainings should be updated to reflect current processes and required communications with caregivers.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers and advocates can work toward creating a more inclusive and comprehensive rate structure that supports the well-being and stability of foster children and provides adequate support for resource families.