



AB 1686: Child Welfare Agencies: Enforcement

SUMMARY

AB 1686 reduces barriers to family reunification for children who are in the foster care system. The practice of requiring parents to pay for their child's stay in foster care is counter to the broader goals of family reunification and child wellbeing. AB 1686 requires Child Welfare Agencies to presume that payment of foster care costs *unnecessarily extends children's time in foster care*. This policy clarification will reform child welfare practice in California by making it consistent with state and federal child welfare policy goals.

BACKGROUND

The foster care system is designed to provide temporary living arrangements for children whose parents are having difficulty providing care. This system is administered by the state and implemented by county child welfare agencies. According to federal data, there are more than 400,000 children in foster care in the U.S; almost 60,000 of these children are in California, with about one-third in L.A. County alone. Most of these children are children of color. In 2020, nearly three-quarters of all children placed into foster care were Black or Latino. In L.A. County, nearly a quarter of all children entering foster care are African American, though they comprise less than 8% of the county's total youth population. Scholars and advocates alike agree that these disproportionalities exist due to a constellation of systemic barriers and a deep history of racialized policies that exacerbate the conditions of life in certain communities.

There is wide agreement within the child welfare community that the best thing for *most* children in foster care is to be reunited with their families. However, in 1984, Congress began making states recoup the costs of foster care from parents of foster youth. California data shows that many parents who are required to pay these expenses experience extreme poverty. Moreover, county practice varies, the practice is not cost-effective to the state, and it works against the foundational goal of reuniting children with their families.

PROBLEM

Billing parents for foster care is counter to the expressed policy goal of family reunification. A report from NPR showed parents

of foster youth were charged anywhere from \$25 to \$1,000+ per month, with \$250 being the median cost in California. One study found that over half of parents referred to this program had an annual income below \$10,000, an amount that is far below the federal poverty level. Unpaid debt poses additional burdens, including negative credit scores and garnished tax returns. Studies show that these payments result in significant impediments to family reunification, increasing children's stay in foster care by over 6 months, on average.

The state spends more implementing this practice than it recoups from parents. Findings from a California study showed that for every \$1.00 spent on administration and implementation, approximately \$0.27 cents was received. Efforts to make parents pay for their children's stay in foster care costs California taxpayers at a rate of approximately 3:1. Studies have shown significant variation between counties on both referrals and the amount charged to parents. Now is the time to reimagine a more equitable system that sufficiently supports our families impacted by the child welfare system.

SOLUTION

The solution to this problem is a policy adjustment that clarifies referral criteria concerning dependent children placed in foster care. By requiring counties to presume that the costs parents are required to pay are likely to pose barriers to family reunification, we more accurately align child welfare practice with our policy goals. Please join us in supporting AB 1686, a bill that will ensure that family reunification is no longer disrupted by increased financial burdens levied on families who have been impacted by the foster care system.

SUPPORT

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