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## Supervisors OK Foster-Care Diversion Plan

By Susan McRae

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LOS ANGELES - Los Angeles County supervisors Tuesday unanimously approved a plan aimed at helping troubled families keep children at home instead of putting them in foster care.

The action comes as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has called for a similar overhaul of the funding structure for the state's child-protective services.

A state report last year found that counties earned more money by putting kids in foster care than keeping them at home.

"It is hard to think of a more profound change in the intent and values of this organization," said David Sanders, director of the county's Department of Children and Family Services.

"The department has, I think, been seen as not functioning the way the people expect for more than 20 years ... for a variety of reasons," Sanders said.

The supervisors' action, he said, will allow the department to use federal funding earmarked solely for foster care in a more flexible manner, mainly by providing services for troubled families that will allow children to stay in the home.

Family reunification, Sanders said, is the goal whenever possible.

The supervisors' vote authorizes child-welfare officials to negotiate with the federal government for a state waiver that would allow the department to use \$250 million of its \$1.4 billion budget on services to help keep children out of foster care.

"I am incredibly heartened to see the board move forward on this plan," said Miriam Krinsky, executive director of the Children's Law Center, the agency that represents children in dependency proceedings. Krinsky, who also lobbies the state government for a variety of benefits for children in dependency proceedings and foster care, said the supervisors' action gives Los Angeles an "invaluable opportunity" to craft new ways of doing business aimed at keeping children and families together.

"We simply take too many children into foster care without trying to tend to the needs of children and families in better ways," Krinsky said. "And flexible funding will release our county from the straitjacket of current federal funding streams and enable us to turn a corner."

Amy Pellman, legal director for the Alliance for Children's Rights in Los Angeles, said the new funding structure aimed at keeping children out of foster care shows "great promise for Los Angeles."

However, she cautioned against being too optimistic without also making sure that the department is able to provide all the services for families that are necessary in order to ensure that children's needs are met - particularly in light of the Department of Children and Family Services long and troubled past.

"It is vital that the programs stress family strength, assess children's needs and support families and communities," Pellman said.

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