

# Overhaul of Foster System Wins OK

## County wants to test the effectiveness of keeping more at-risk children in their own homes.

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The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a major overhaul of its troubled foster-care system Tuesday, a move aimed at keeping thousands of children at home with their families.

The reform effort, which needs approval from the state and federal governments, comes nearly a year after the supervisors hired the latest in a series of leaders for the Department of Children and Family Services. The new director, Minnesota transplant David Sanders, is convinced that many of the county's 29,000 children in out-of-home care would be better off if they were reunited with their families.

But public policy is shaped by money, and the county's \$1.4-billion child welfare system relies heavily on federal funds geared toward children who are removed from their homes. That funding stream, critics say, creates a twisted incentive for government officials to take children away from unstable families rather than provide services to help them stay put.

"Right now, the primary way for us to help families where children have been abused or neglected is to remove the children," Sanders said in an interview. "What we want is the flexibility to better support children in their families."

Los Angeles County's foster-care system is the largest — and one of the most notorious — in the nation.

The county's children are twice as likely to suffer from repeated abuse and neglect as children nationwide, according to a federal review of child and family services. The rate of abuse and neglect in foster care is triple the national average.

The county also fares poorly when it comes to finding permanent homes for foster children. The average length of time to finalize an adoption is more than double the national standard.

Also, more than 76% of children nationally were reunited with their families within one year of entering the foster system. But in Los Angeles, the figure was just 19%.

If the overhaul is approved, the federal Department of Health and Human Services would bend the rules so that Los Angeles County could conduct a five-year "demonstration project" to essentially test the theory. Goals include reducing the number of children entering out-of-home care by 15%, cutting the average time spent in foster care, increasing adoptions and reducing abuse and neglect in foster homes.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger backed a similar idea in his January budget proposal. In Los Angeles, county supervisors approved Sanders' proposal with little comment Tuesday, following a long discussion on the matter last week.

"It's clear that we have to change the way we do business," said Miriam Krinsky, executive director of the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles, which represents foster children in juvenile dependency court. " ... We remove too many children from the home [and] we separate siblings too often. This waiver enables Los Angeles and the state to free itself from the federal straitjacket that funding streams currently impose upon us."

The waiver would loosen restrictions on about \$380 million each year in public funds that the county could use to beef up support networks around dysfunctional families.

Social workers would ideally have lighter caseloads so they could spend more time with each family, according to Sanders. Schools, churches, police officers, government agencies and neighborhood groups all would pitch in to help, whether that means providing after-school tutoring for the children or counseling for the parents.

But some question whether the "strong community partnerships" touted by supporters are strong enough to hold fraying families together when a child's safety is at risk. Such neighbor-to-neighbor cohesion may work in a small town, they say, but vast and urban Los Angeles is another story.

"From a social work perspective, it's warm, cuddly and wonderful. If it worked, I'd be shouting from the rooftops," said David Alaynick, a veteran court-appointed attorney for parents and children in the county's dependency court. "The difficulty is we don't have enough of those services to families."

The promise of keeping children with their birth families strikes a hopeful chord in many people. But leaving children with volatile parents can sometimes be risky. In one recent case in Canoga Park, social workers kept a 2-year-old boy with his mother despite multiple allegations of child abuse. By October, the toddler was dead and his mother was charged with killing him.

Los Angeles County hopes to win approval to start its program by October. Several other California counties, including Riverside, Sacramento and Fresno, have expressed interest in the waiver, state officials said Tuesday.

The federal government has granted similar waivers to Ohio, Indiana and other states.

"I think it is a major step forward," said Bruce Wagstaff, deputy director of Children and Family Services for the California Department of Social Services.

"It appears to be right in line with where the [Schwarzenegger] administration wants to go."

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