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Foster care gets Capitol scrutiny

Federal fiscal policies counterproductive, state lawmakers told.

By Clea Benson -- Bee Capitol Bureau - (*Published March 17, 2004*)

Instead of placing some abused and neglected children in foster care, Contra Costa County moves entire troubled families - including parents - into another family's home. In Monterey County, families who agree to provide emergency foster care can get help buying a house.

With California under pressure from the federal government to improve its foster care system, some counties are trying such new approaches to deal with child abuse and neglect.

But at the same time, federal funding rules discourage innovative programs that help keep troubled families together, advocates for children told an Assembly panel Tuesday.

"Counterproductive fiscal policies put us in a straitjacket," Frank Mecca, head of the County Welfare Directors' Association, said during a hearing on child-welfare programs before the Assembly Committee on Human Services.

In a review of California's child-welfare system last year, the federal Department of Health and Human Services flunked the state on several counts, and was especially critical of its foster care program. Now the state risks losing federal child-welfare funds if it does not improve. About 91,000 children are in foster care statewide.

The federal government wants the state to move children out of foster care more quickly. But most federal child-welfare money goes for foster care and not for programs designed to keep families together in the first place, Mecca said.

Tuesday's hearing came almost simultaneously with the release of a report funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts that said states need more flexibility to spend federal money on child welfare.

"Current federal financing rules favor keeping children in foster care over providing services that can help keep children safely at home," says the report, written by a nonprofit project based at the University of Illinois.

As with many federally funded programs, states can get around the federal rules by applying for a waiver. California does have a waiver allowing the state more

flexibility in spending money on some child-welfare programs, but it only applies to services for the most severely troubled children.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' authority to grant waivers will expire at the end of this month, unless Congress decides to extend it.

One program operating under a waiver is Project Destiny in Alameda County, where children with severe mental-health and substance-abuse problems are kept out of group homes and placed in their own communities, sometimes with their own families. The children and their families then get intensive therapy and other services.

The program spends the same money that would otherwise go toward foster care, and often has better results, administrators said.

"Project Destiny shows it's more efficient and more humane to fund the needs of children who have been abused and neglected rather than funding their placement in a group home or foster care," said Fiona Branagh, a policy specialist for Alameda County.

About the Writer

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