

EDITORIAL

Foster Care's Shame

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So rickety are foster-care programs across the nation, and so invisible are the 500,000 children in them, that the release last week of a federal survey detailing how all 50 states are failing these vulnerable youngsters surprised no one. California shares with 15 other states the shameful distinction of falling short on nearly every measure used to assess the quality of care. This booby prize might be reason for despair, but Los Angeles leaders instead hope it will push state bureaucrats to help localities provide better-tailored, more individual care.

Federal investigators reviewed data and a sample of case files in every state from 2000 to 2003, looking at such key measures as the length of time children spent in foster care, the stability of their arrangements and how frequently they suffered abuse and neglect at the hands of their caregivers. California's 58 county-run foster-care programs fared poorly on all these key indexes.

Children up and down the state, and particularly in Los Angeles, bear the steep costs of these failures. Already traumatized by their parents' violence or indifference, they often drift for years in county care, passed from one social worker to another, tossed among foster homes, often finally "graduating" at age 18 to homelessness, teen pregnancy or crime.

The survey's dismal results could exacerbate those failures because the federal Department of Health and Human Services could sock failing states with penalties — up to \$18.2 million in California's case. The feds already pay about half the national tab for foster children, about \$5 billion annually. This money largely goes to cover state and county administrative costs and to pay for spaghetti and blue jeans for children in care. Instead of reducing funding, a better way to improve the odds for local youngsters would be to give states and counties flexibility in how they spend federal dollars.

Los Angeles officials, for example, are asking permission to use federal dollars to pay for services — like counselors and tutors — to help children curb their angry outbursts or pass geometry. This kind of one-on-one help will surely increase the odds that these youngsters will graduate from high school and learn job skills.

The county's application for that waiver authority now sits in Sacramento, waiting for state officials to send it on to Washington. The county, joined later by the state, has been working on this request for at least six months. Meanwhile, 12 states have submitted competing applications. Health and Human Services officials have already announced they won't grant them all. If nothing else, last week's gloomy survey results should spur state officials to get that application in the mail.

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