

Foster care numbers dip 14% under new program

By Clea Benson -- Bee Capitol Bureau - (Published October 14, 2004)

The number of children in foster care in California has fallen about 14 percent since 2000, in part because a new program has allowed relatives to take permanent guardianship of children without formally adopting them, according to figures released Wednesday by researchers at the University of Illinois.

The study, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, showed that about 14,000 California children who were in foster care with relatives were shifted to the new status, which allows relatives to continue receiving a subsidy of about \$528 to \$597 per month.

The report estimates that about 20,000 additional children nationwide, including many in California, could benefit from the arrangement.

Permanent guardianship enables families to stop checking in continuously with caseworkers and the courts, as they must under a traditional foster care arrangement. At the same time, the children keep a legal tie to their parents, since they are not formally adopted.

In 2000, there were 100,000 children in foster care in California, about 43 percent of them in the care of relatives such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. By April of this year, the number of children in foster care statewide had dropped to 86,000, about 35 percent of them in the care of relatives.

Advocates are hoping the information will pressure federal lawmakers to increase funding for the program. Currently, the few states that have it are using limited welfare-to-work funds instead of federal foster care money to pay monthly subsidies to guardians.

"There are a lot of federal programs, and foster care is principal among them, that are based on archaic assumptions and circumstances," said Frank Mecca, director of the California Welfare Directors Association. "When these programs were born 35 years ago, maybe it was the case that relatives could afford to take abused and neglected children without a subsidy. That's not the case anymore."

The Bush administration supports the idea and has recommended it to Congress, said Wade Horn, the assistant secretary for children and families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. A bill that would allow states to use their foster care funds for guardianship subsidies has been introduced in the House, Horn said.

Researchers have found that children in foster homes with relatives are safer and less likely to bounce around from home to home than those with non-relatives. But at the same time, some children's groups such as the Youth Law Center have been pressing the state to do a better job of inspecting relative foster care homes.