



March 25, 2024

The Honorable Jesse Gabriel
Chair, Assembly Budget Committee
1021 O Street, Room 8230
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Scott Wiener
Chair, Senate Budget & Fiscal Review Committee
1021 O Street, Room 502
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Child Welfare Services Budget Cuts

Dear Chair Gabriel and Chair Wiener:

The Urban Counties of California (UCC) and Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC) write to oppose the Governor's Budget proposals that would cut \$62.5 million General Fund (GF) in program funding impacting vulnerable foster children, youth and families served by the child welfare system. These cuts would eliminate vital services proven to stabilize youth and families and will result in increased costs in other systems including housing, criminal justice, health, and behavioral health.

Specifically, UCC and RCRC oppose the elimination of the following programs and services:

Family Urgent Response System (FURS): FURS was created by and for current and former foster youth and their caregivers to provide immediate, 24/7, individualized, trauma-informed support via a statewide hotline that provides a warm hand-off to a local mobile response team comprised of at least two trained individuals (mental health clinicians, peer supports, social workers, etc.).

FURS responds within one to three hours to any situation arising in the home that causes stress or concern to either the child/youth or caregiver. This low-entry threshold reflects the fact that children impacted by trauma may have behaviors that, if left unaddressed, can quickly escalate. A call to FURS also does not require further levels of screening, assessment or referral—which are typical processes required of other systems and that take time and can act as a deterrent to seeking assistance. Since its creation in 2019, FURS has responded to 5,000 calls from youth and caregivers a year, connecting them to ongoing mental health services, leading to a reduced likelihood of foster children and youth's needs escalating to the point of requiring residential treatment or having a psychiatric emergency. FURS offers an alternative to contacts with law enforcement when behaviors escalate in the home, so that youth are not criminalized due to unmet mental health needs. FURS is one of the few concrete supports provided to caregivers in the foster care system, supporting county recruitment and retention of family-based caregivers, particularly kinship caregivers, which aligns with federal and state requirements and goals of increasing kinship care.

The Governor's Budget proposal to eliminate the FURS program in 2024-25 and annually ongoing will lead to placement instability, delays to permanency, and a loss of family-based caregivers, and will likely result in an increased need for congregate care or other intensive and more costly behavioral health

interventions. Ultimately, this will harm the foster children and youth whom the foster care system is required to protect.

Housing for Foster Youth in Supervised Independent Living Placements (SILP): The Governor's Budget proposes to cut \$18.8 million GF and halt implementation of the SILP payment housing supplement in FY 2024-25, thereby eliminating the program that would have provided housing supplements to more than 3,000 foster youths in SILPs based on the cost of rent in their county starting in 2025.

The Administration's proposed permanent foster care rate structure will not address the inequities of housing costs across counties or the inadequacy of the SILP payment to cover foster youths' housing costs, which continue to increase each year. It is critical that non-minor dependents are stably housed to support their participation in the activities required of them by the Extended Foster Care program. One in five current foster youth in California have at least one episode of homelessness between the ages of 18 and 21. Both the State and counties have a shared responsibility for the care and well-being of foster youth, including the provision of the basic necessity of housing to successfully facilitate the transition to adulthood.

Housing Navigation and Maintenance Program (HNMP): The Governor's Budget also proposes to eliminate the HNMP (\$13.7 million GF cut) in FY 2024-25 and annually ongoing. The HNMP is administered through the Department of Housing and Community Development with funding allocated to county child welfare agencies to provide housing navigation services to young adults, including current and former foster youth, ages 18 through 24. Assistance includes finding and securing housing, case management, emergency supports, housing loss prevention, and coordination and linkage to resources and services. The HNMP also allows child welfare agencies, working with their local Continuums of Care housing partners, to leverage federal housing vouchers through the Family Unification Program (FUP) and Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers. If HNMP is eliminated, it would result in the loss of \$22 million in federal FUP/FYI housing supports for former foster youth, impacting 1,300 former foster youth who would be immediately at risk of homelessness.

Deferral of \$80 million for the Bringing Families Home Program

The Governor's Budget proposes to delay the availability of \$80 million GF, most of the one-time funding provided in FY 2022-23 for the Bringing Families Home (BFH) Program, would make these funds available in FY 2025-26, rather than FY 2024-25. Established in 2016 as a pilot program and expanded in 2019, the BFH Program is administered by county child welfare and tribal agencies to reduce the number of families in the child welfare system experiencing, or at risk of homelessness. The BFH Program promotes supportive housing and rapid re-housing for families reunifying with their children and helps to prevent foster care entry by supporting the parents of children who are at risk of abuse and neglect. BFH is an important resource for black and Native American children and families who are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system.

Counties currently have through June 30, 2025, to expend the funds from FY 2022-23. By delaying the availability of a portion of the FY 2022-23 funding, the proposal has the potential to jeopardize some counties' ability to maintain current levels of services to vulnerable children and families. Most of the families utilizing the BFH program are not eligible for other housing assistance programs, and without the program would likely end up unhoused and potentially separated from their children.

The State and counties have a shared responsibility in the care and future of children and youth in the foster care system. We urge the Legislature to protect this critical safety net program, and to reject efforts to reduce or eliminate programs and services that provide upstream supports that have lifelong, profound impacts on vulnerable children, youth, and families.

For the reasons outlined above, UCC and RCRC oppose the child welfare services reductions. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,



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cc: Members and Consultants, Senate Budget & Fiscal Review Subcommittee No. 3
Members and Consultants, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 2