

Executive Summary

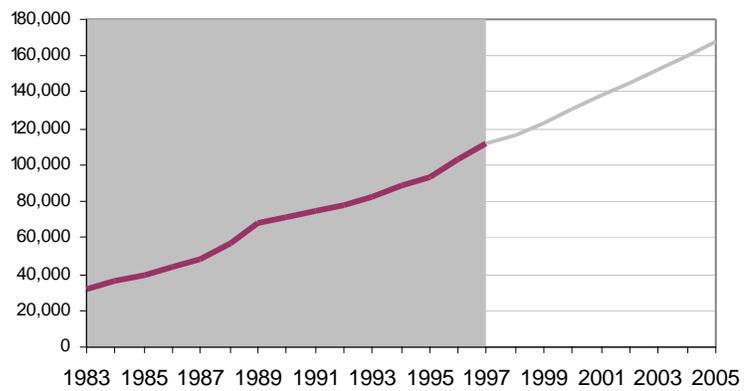
In the shadow of California's prosperity, the plague of child abuse and neglect grows more severe. An increasing percentage of a growing population of young people is flooding a child welfare system that has proven incapable of healing the complex problems of traumatized children.

California is failing to protect and care for abused children. Consequently, an increasing number of children are growing up broken – hurt by their parents and let down by the system intended to be their refuge.

The tragedies unfold child by child, but the trauma is universal. Often under the scourge of drug and alcohol abuse, parental love and patience lose out to abuse and severe neglect. The government intervenes, and nearly 100 times a day somewhere in California a child is placed into foster care. Despite benevolent intentions and billions of dollars, the government has proven to be a poor surrogate parent in these cases – seemingly incapable of ensuring that these children receive the education, medical care and counseling that all children need. In the end, troubled children often end up as troubled adults. The personal anguish becomes a public calamity.

The mounting numbers indicate something is very wrong. Over the last 15 years, the proportion of children in foster care has more than doubled. The absolute number of children in foster care has tripled. If the trend continues, by 2005 more than 167,000 California children could be in state-supported care – the equivalent of 8,000 kindergarten classes.

Children in Foster Care Have Tripled Since 1983



At this rate, 167,000 children could be in the State's care by 2005

Projections based on data from Child Welfare Research Center, 1994 and 1997. Dept of Finance population projections. See Appendix D for methodology.

When the Little Hoover Commission started this review, its initial focus was on foster care – the public program to temporarily parent children rescued from abusive homes. But as with other social maladies, the traditional prescription is not the cure. Foster care is not stopping the abuse or healing the trauma. As a result, the Commission stepped back and took a broader look. The purpose of the public policy is – or at least should be – to reduce the abuse of children, to protect and care for those children who are abused, and to provide for abused children a nurturing and permanent home – either with their natural family or a new one. Toward that end, the Commission advocates a holistic and child-centered approach to this problem, from prevention to aftercare.

The Commission’s conclusions are also influenced by its previous work – in 1987, when there were 48,000 children in foster care, and in 1992 when there were 78,000 in foster care. Now, dozens of legislative and administrative reforms later, 105,000 children are in foster care.¹ Overall, progress has been slow, isolated and limited. The system remains so complex that resources cannot be used where common sense and research say they should be used. So many agencies have a role that no one has responsibility.

It has become clear to the Commission that above all California needs to put in place a management structure to identify and solve problems – not to find ways around the bureaucracy, but to fix the bureaucracy; not to estimate trends, but to measure performance. Legislative and gubernatorial support is essential. The innovation and initiative of county social service agencies also are critical. The missing linchpin, however, is overarching state management that is accountable for the protection and care of vulnerable children.

Each year more than 700,000 cases of suspected abuse are reported to California authorities. Some 36,000 of those children are found to be in so much danger that they are taken from their parents and placed into foster care.²

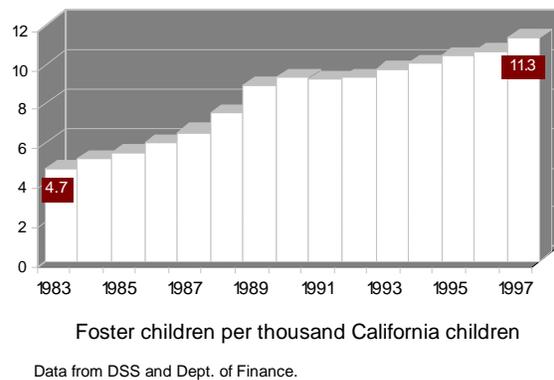
For some children, foster care is the temporary and nurturing refuge it is supposed to be. But for most children, “temporary” drags into months and years. They are bounced from one “home” to another. Some are

adopted, others are reunified with their families, and still others spend the rest of their troubled youths in the system. Many children who do leave foster care, return to parents who are still unfit; the children are abused again, and cycle back into the system.

Because children are entering the system faster than they are leaving it, the number of children in foster care is growing at a faster rate than the number of children in California. In many counties, social workers are overwhelmed by this challenge alone. The system is struggling so much to care for the wounded, that not enough is being done to stop the harm.

From the beginning of this study, the Commission heard a chorus of support for fundamental change built around the needs of children who by accident of birth are denied a nurturing childhood. Throughout the course of this study, the Commission found diligent professionals and community leaders striving to curtail child abuse and strengthen families.

A Growing Proportion of California's Children Are In Foster Care



But the evidence indicates that child maltreatment is still growing. And the experience of the last decade is that the tide will not be turned by piecemeal reforms or narrowly defined pilot projects.

Highest Quality of Care

A comprehensive response to this problem requires three important steps. First, the State's top elected officials need to make a full commitment to give the highest quality of care to abused and neglected children. Secondly, new administrative leadership and attitude are needed to prevent abuse, improve care for children in short-term foster care, and promote long-term successful outcomes for children. Finally, to resolve implementation issues and ensure progress is made, child welfare efforts need to be continuously reassessed. This evaluation should be based on consistent, longitudinal data and rigorous analytical research.

"Highest quality of care" is the care and opportunities that nurturing parents would provide their own children to prepare them for adulthood.

The following findings and recommendations define the specific reforms the Commission believes are necessary to help mend the broken hearts and bruised minds and bodies of California's abused children:

Finding 1: The State has not met its obligation to protect and care for abused children.

Policy-makers should affirm the extraordinary obligation that the State has to care for abused children and the imperative to prevent abuse by helping troubled families. This affirmation should be expressed as clear goals for public agencies to pursue. Among them:

1. When possible, children must be spared the trauma of abuse through targeted prevention efforts.
2. When prevention fails, the State must intervene quickly to protect the child, treat the trauma, and provide high quality care.
3. When it is in the best interest of the child, intense efforts should be made to safely reunify the family. Otherwise, intensive efforts should be made to permanently place the child in a family-based setting that satisfies the child's needs.
4. When children leave foster care, assistance should continue to help them secure their footing on the path to adulthood.

Despite the difficulty of this task, there are reasons for optimism. First, federal, state, and local child welfare agencies increasingly agree on how the system should conceptually work. Second, previous initiatives provide a foundation for implementing comprehensive reforms. Finally, there is broad agreement that incremental change is no longer acceptable.

Recommendation 1: The Governor and Legislature should fully commit the State to protect and care for abused children. The Governor and Legislature should:

- ✓ ***Make child safety, well-being and permanence a high priority.*** The State's chief policy-makers need to make it clear to public agencies, community leaders, and the public at large that preventing abuse and caring for abused children is a top state priority. When the State assumes the role of parent, it assumes the responsibility and the obligation to provide the highest quality of care.

✓ **Adopt clear goals.** This commitment can be best expressed as clear goals directing public agencies and service providers to prevent abuse, ensure foster care homes are nurturing refuges, reunify families or find permanent alternatives, and support those children as they continue to heal and mature.

Finding 2: State programs are not organized, managed, or funded to comprehensively meet the State's obligation to abused children.

The Department of Social Services is responsible for child welfare, foster care, and adoption programs, but dozens of state and county agencies provide essential services to abused children. Similarly, programs are funded from several federal and state sources, each with separate restrictions on how the money can be used. These artificial barriers thwart efforts to address the multiple problems inflicting these families, especially drug and alcohol abuse. The diffused authority and narrow funding streams leave gaps in the safety net – as a result, more children are abused and more abused children receive inadequate care.

Decades of experience demonstrate that money alone will not solve this problem. Nor can the State direct local agencies to integrate care without integrating its own efforts. The State must create a management infrastructure that coordinates programs, eliminates duplicative administration costs, and holds administrators accountable for getting the job done.

Recommendation 2: The Governor and Legislature should create in the Health and Human Services Agency an Office of Child Services, headed by an Undersecretary of Child Services, responsible for preventing child abuse and caring for abused children. The Undersecretary should be directed to:

✓ **Improve partnerships.** The Undersecretary of Child Services should establish a council of federal, state, and local partners to define and implement reform strategies and determine responsibilities for preventing child abuse, providing high quality care, and improving outcomes for abused children.

✓ **Increase performance accountability.** The Undersecretary of Child Services should have clear authority and responsibility to direct state

programs serving abused children and be held accountable for the performance and outcomes of those programs.

- ✓ ***Create an accurate child abuse database.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should compile and maintain a comprehensive and consistent database on the status of affected children, and on the characteristics, demographic factors and impacts of child abuse in California. This data should be publicly available to promote understanding of child abuse, its prevention, remedies, and consequences.
- ✓ ***Adopt comprehensive performance measures.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should clearly define a comprehensive set of performance standards and outcome measures for all programs serving children vulnerable to abuse.
- ✓ ***Identify best practices.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should research, evaluate, and identify practices that produce the best outcomes for children, have the highest return on investment, and can be replicated to produce the highest quality of care for vulnerable children. The Undersecretary should ensure these practices are implemented to the maximum extent feasible.
- ✓ ***Reengineer the funding process.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should lead a multi-department effort to integrate the resources of state programs serving children vulnerable to abuse and at-risk families. The effort should include pursuing federal waivers to meld funding streams and eliminate program-based barriers to high quality care. The Undersecretary also should consider financial incentives for foster care and service providers, such as those who successfully provide stable homes for children who have moved from one placement to another.
- ✓ ***Assist recruitment and expand training.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should help counties and providers recruit, train, and retain an adequate cadre of professionals from a range of disciplines, including health, mental health and child development. This should include expanding initiatives such as educational scholarships for

county social workers and collaborative efforts with universities to meet the demand for qualified workers.

Finding 3: The State does not systematically assess the performance of child abuse programs, reduce the barriers to quality services and replicate successful strategies.

Policy-makers do not receive the information needed to develop comprehensive child abuse policies and program administrators do not have the information needed to manage for results. The information that does exist is intended to gauge compliance with regulations – rather than assess the performance of programs, measured by the effects these efforts are having in the lives of children. As the Department of Finance concluded in 1997, despite efforts to collect that information, “it was not possible to assess the effectiveness of specific child welfare programs.”³

Recommendation 3: The Governor and the Legislature should direct the Undersecretary to regularly report on the performance of child abuse programs. The report should include:

- ✓ ***Outcome-based measurement*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should annually report to the Governor and the Legislature on the quality of care and achievement of child-based outcome measures in the area of safety, well-being and permanence. To gauge cost effectiveness, each program serving abused children should detail the number of children served and expenditures made to achieve the State’s goals for these children.
- ✓ ***Recommendations for improvements***. The Undersecretary of Child Services, based on the examination of best practices, other research and evaluations, should recommend to the Governor and Legislature statutory changes necessary to improve outcomes for abused children.
- ✓ ***Improve support for local initiatives***. The Undersecretary of Child Services should identify and report to the Legislature and the Governor on opportunities for the State to improve support for local initiatives successfully serving abused children and their families, including incentives to counties the replicate proven strategies.

Finding 4: The State has not fully recognized the impact of child abuse on broader public goals such as reducing crime, improving adult self-sufficiency, and increasing the productivity and well-being of the State's residents.

In studies on prison operations, child care, school finance, child support enforcement, juvenile justice, and health care the Commission has recognized the relationship between successful public policies for children and the state's long-term well-being. Recent studies by the RAND Corporation assessing early intervention programs, the University of Wisconsin regarding outcomes for foster youth, and the U.S. Department of Justice regarding impacts of child abuse on violent crimes and incarceration rates, all point to a connection between child abuse and long-term adult problems.⁴

Programs addressing child abuse should be developed in the context of the downstream consequences. Successful programs will save money. Failed programs will cost even more.

Recommendation 4: The Governor and the Legislature should integrate the consequences of child-based programs into policy decisions promoting the broader public interest. Specifically, policy-makers should:

- ✓ ***Consider long-term impacts.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should, in the annual report to the Governor and the Legislature, assess how child abuse programs and trends will impact other social, criminal justice, and health programs in the future. The Undersecretary also should recommend policy changes that would reduce long-term public costs.
- ✓ ***Assess impacts of child abuse on adult maladies.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should work with criminal justice, public assistance, and health care offices to identify adults who were abused as children. Based on that information the Undersecretary should refine child welfare programs to produce better long-term outcomes.
- ✓ ***Invest to reduce long-term costs.*** The Department of Finance should assess and report annually how investments in children's programs are impacting the costs of other state programs and recommend ways those investments can be used to reduce long-term costs.

Targeted Abuse Prevention and Early Intervention

The State does not focus enough resources on preventing child abuse in the first place. Researchers have found that prevention, early intervention, and family preservation programs can reap immense benefits – to children, their families and the public at large – if the programs are targeted at high-risk families.⁵ The success of these programs – and the ultimate safety of children – rests in part on the assessment tools used to determine when children can safely stay with or be returned to families.

Finding 5: Child abuse prevention and early intervention efforts fall short of their potential to protect children from harm and spare families the trauma of losing children to foster care.

Successful prevention and early intervention efforts educate new parents about healthy child rearing, strengthen the ability of families to resolve conflicts in non-abusive ways, and target assistance to reduce financial and social stresses that can cause abusive behavior. The State is slowly expanding its support for community-based prevention and intervention efforts. However, children still must first be removed from families before they are eligible for most of the services they need. One study found that more than 90 percent of the families reported for abuse did not receive family preservation services before the child was put into foster care.⁶ Most of these families received emergency services, but those were limited to assessments and referrals.

Recommendation 5: The State should expand cost-effective child abuse prevention and early intervention efforts. The Governor and Legislature should:

- ✓ ***Require consistent performance evaluation.*** The State should require pilot and demonstration projects to adhere to rigorous common data collection and assessment methods.
- ✓ ***Leverage local resources.*** Legislation is needed to promote the use of local resources, such as Proposition 10 funding, to decrease the need for foster care, child welfare services, and other public assistance programs by preventing child abuse and strengthening families.

✓ **Replicate proven models.** The State should encourage innovative programs by funding pilots, conducting rigorous evaluation and aggressively replicating and expanding cost-effective strategies to minimize child abuse and the need for foster placements.

Finding 6: The State lacks an accurate and dynamic assessment tool to measure the risk to vulnerable children and determine the best approach to promote their well-being.

Perhaps the most critical link in the government's response to child abuse is how it assesses a family in crisis. In some counties the decision to remove children from parents is driven largely by a zero tolerance toward parents with drug abuse problems. In other counties, more emphasis is placed on keeping families intact. On a day-to-day basis, these decisions are influenced by the availability of foster care, the number of incoming abused children, and shifting sensitivity to removing children based on yesterday's headlines. At the same time, researchers have found that it is common for authorities to receive several reports of abuse before children are removed from the home, suggesting that in some cases abuses are repeated before that step is taken.⁷ As discussed above, most families receive little assistance before conditions become so severe that children are removed.

The decision to keep children in the care of their parents or remove them should be determined by what is in the best interest of the child. Which county the child lives in should not affect the decision. Nor should children be subjected to repeated abuse because of inadequate assessment.

The best assessment tools are a combination of instinct, experience and science, and the State is trying to improve the ability to determine risk. This effort should not be a one-time task, but an ongoing effort to improve the ability of caseworkers to make one of the hardest decisions public employees are required to make.

Recommendation 6: The Department of Social Services, in partnership with federal and local government agencies, should develop accurate and dynamic assessment tools for statewide use. Specifically, the department should:

- ✓ ***Develop accurate safety assessment tools.*** The State should expedite efforts to develop tools that accurately assess the risk in maintaining children with their families or returning them to their families.
- ✓ ***Develop accurate assessment tools.*** The State should expedite efforts to develop family and child assessment tools to determine the care and services children need to be swiftly, safely and successfully reunified with their parents or placed in an alternative permanent home.
- ✓ ***Provide training and technical assistance.*** The State should promote statewide training and technical assistance to expedite full implementation of these tools by counties.

Finding 7: Welfare reform could further stress families, making more children vulnerable to abuse and neglect

While it is too early to determine how CalWORKs implementation will impact foster care, the State should try to reduce risks to low-income children from welfare reform changes. In particular, the State needs to assess whether welfare reform is impacting the well-being of children, and if necessary adopt strategies to minimize child abuse and neglect in families receiving or leaving CalWORKs assistance.

Recommendation 7: Policy-makers should monitor implementation of welfare reform and mitigate any harmful impacts on children. The Governor and the Legislature should:

- ✓ ***Monitor the impact of welfare reform on child abuse.*** The State should require the Department of Social Services to monitor and routinely report on the impact of CalWORKs on the well-being of children. DSS also should recommend ways to reduce the possible harmful impacts of these reforms on children.

- ✓ **Strengthen vulnerable families.** The State should target resources and services at welfare families at risk of losing children to foster care because of increased stress resulting from welfare reform.

Quality Short-Term Foster Care

As required by federal and state law, "reasonable efforts" must be made to help parents safely reunify with a child in foster care. When parents do not receive these services, judges cannot terminate parental rights and free the child for adoption.

The foster care caseload is growing because more children are entering the system, they are staying longer in foster care, and too many children return to foster care after a failed attempt to reunify them with their families. The time lines created to prevent children from languishing in foster care are inadequately enforced. And while children wait in foster care for their parents to resolve their problems, the parents are often waiting for the services intended to help cure their ills. The State must fully live up to its obligation to care for and nurture abused children in its protection. By healing the traumas of maltreatment, the State can speed these children toward successful adulthood.

Finding 8: Children are staying in temporary placement too long – aggravating the trauma of separation and limiting opportunities for permanent placement in nurturing families.

One in four children in foster care in California spends more than 4 years in care.⁸ Despite state and federal legislation to shorten stays in foster care, too many children stay too long in foster care. Judges frequently must extend foster care for children because “reasonable efforts” have not been made by county child welfare agencies to reunify the family. Counties argue they do not have the resources to comply with the reasonable efforts requirement within statutory time frames.

Recommendation 8: The Undersecretary of Child Services should lead a partnership of social service and judicial agencies to reduce the time children are in temporary placement. To support that effort, the Governor and the Legislature should:

- ✓ **Assess compliance with time requirements.** The State should assess county compliance with time lines for terminating parental rights and conducting permanent placement planning. The State also should identify best practices to improve outcomes.

- ✓ **Fund services.** The State should target assistance to counties to ensure adequate resources are available to meet “reasonable effort” requirements within prescribed time frames.
- ✓ **Require inter-jurisdictional case management** The State should require the development of effective case management tools to coordinate the services needed to help abused children, and reunify families or achieve alternative permanent placement.

Finding 9: Alcohol and drug use is epidemic among abusive parents and too often sh ortages in treatment delay successful permanent placement of children.

Child welfare advocates, judges, child welfare administrators, and academics estimate that drug and alcohol abuse is a significant factor in up to 80 percent of foster care cases.⁹ The Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs reports 59 percent of the women in prenatal substance abuse treatment have an active child welfare case, and 21 percent of their children are in foster care.¹⁰ Other studies indicate as much as 66 percent of child fatalities involve parents or caretakers who abuse alcohol and other drugs.¹¹ Yet treatment has not been integrated into child welfare programs.

Recommendation 9: The Undersecretary of Child Services should ensure alcohol and drug treatment programs are adequately funded and integrated into foster care program s. Specifically, the Undersecretary should:

- ✓ **Make foster care families a priority for treatment** The State should earmark alcohol and drug program funding to provide intensive treatment services to children and to parents of children who are vulnerable to abuse or are already in foster care.
- ✓ **Track service delivery.** Judges need timely and accurate information on whether “reasonable efforts” are being made to ensure parents receive drug treatment. Similarly, drug courts and dependency courts should be better coordinated to deal with overlapping cases.
- ✓ **Fund case management for parents.** Adequate funding should be provided so social workers can ensure that natural parents requiring drug treatment receive the necessary services. In particular, state

officials should pursue federal funding to help counties satisfy the federal requirement to make reasonable efforts to reunify families.

- ✓ **Expand public-private partnerships.** Efforts should be made to promote community-based public and private partnerships to support substance abuse treatment and sustained sobriety before and after family reunification. Community-based organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous and childcare service providers should be enlisted to help parents maintain sobriety and to promote safe environments for children.
- ✓ **Report on progress.** The Undersecretary's annual report should assess the impacts of substance abuse on foster care and efforts to integrate substance abuse treatment into foster care programs.

Finding 10: Relative foster care placements tend to be of longer duration than traditional foster family care and disproportionately contribute to foster care case load growth.

The concept of relatives fostering children is not new. Historically, foster care and child welfare programs were designed to meet the short-term needs of children until they could be safely returned to parents or placed permanently with an appropriate substitute. In many cases, placing abused children with responsible relatives may be the preferred alternative when returning them to parents is not feasible.

However, in the rush to expand kin care and capture its benefits, some adverse consequences have emerged. For a variety of reasons, relative placements tend to be of longer duration than other foster placements. The State needs to be aware of these impacts and recognize that kin care is often a longer-term commitment.

Recommendation 10: The Governor and Legislature should enact legislation to support relative placements as long-term placements. The legislation should:

- ✓ **Require examination of relative placements.** The Undersecretary of Child Services should assess the use of relative foster care to develop a better understanding of how well those arrangements are meeting the needs of abused children and to determine the ability of relatives

to satisfy the growing demand for foster care. The Undersecretary should recommend any policy changes needed to help relatives care for abused children placed with their families.

- ✓ ***Recognize relative placement as a unique status.*** The State should recognize the quasi-permanent nature of many kin foster families, provide for their unique service needs, and amend permanent planning requirements to reflect their status.
- ✓ ***Revise the support formula for relative foster families.*** The State pays a reduced level of support to relatives caring for children who come from families that are not eligible for federal welfare assistance. The rates should not be based on the financial status of the child's natural family, but on the needs of the child in their kin foster home.

Finding 11: While children in foster care are eligible for services, they often do not receive the help necessary to treat their trauma or meet their developmental needs.

There is an expectation that when children become dependents of the State, they receive the help needed to lead normal lives. These children are eligible for an array of services – such as health care, mental health counseling and educational assistance. But the system that provides these services is so fragmented, anemic, and disorganized that it regularly fails to meet the needs of these children.

Recommendation 11: The Governor and Legislature should direct the Undersecretary of Child Services to monitor, assess, and where necessary revise programs to ensure that dependent children receive needed services. The legislation should require:

- ✓ ***Expanded mental health services.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should complete the expansion of the mental health “system of care” statewide.
- ✓ ***A plan for service delivery.*** While county officials prepare individual needs assessments for children, those plans should detail how the needs will be met and who will be responsible for ensuring the services are provided.
- ✓ ***Evaluation of service delivery.*** The Undersecretary should evaluate mental health, health, dental, and vision care services for foster care

children; measure the extent foster care children are being denied these services; and, identify obstacles to high quality services. The assessment should include the impacts of out-of-county placements and managed health care on the delivery of services.

- ✓ **Corrective action plans.** Departments should be directed to develop plans to correct deficiencies in mental health, health, dental and vision care service delivery to foster care children, identify costs and benefits. They should seek legislative and state budget approval for authority to implement plans to provide a comprehensive system of care for children in foster care.

Improved Long-Term Outcomes

Child abuse and foster care programs have been historically shortsighted, limiting the assistance provided to children when they are reunified with their families or adopted by new families. In many cases, natural parents have not resolved the problems that led to the original abuse, and the children have developed behavioral problems associated with the abuse and the trauma of being separated from their family. As a result, the reunification or adoption fails and children cycle back into the foster care system – further scarred and even less likely to find permanent homes where they can grow into independent adults. A number of reforms are needed to improve long-term outcomes for abused children.

Finding 12: The adoption process is unnecessarily tedious and cumbersome, frustrating the goal of increasing the number of successful foster care adoptions, particularly for older children.

Despite increased efforts not enough of the children in foster care are being adopted. The Department of Social Services foresees that only about 6,000 of the 105,000 children in foster care will be adopted each year.¹² The department and its foster care partners are taking steps to streamline procedures. But more needs to be done to recruit and assist adoptive parents, particularly if time limits for terminating parental rights are to be met in the future. And while the State has expanded assistance to adoptive families, it is not enough to help these new families cope with the challenges of raising a child who was abused.

Recommendation 12: The Governor and Legislature should expedite adoptions of children in foster care. The legislation should require:

- ✓ ***An analysis of reunification failures.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should study the characteristics of foster care cases where reunification efforts fail and recommend legislation to expedite termination of parental rights in these cases and free children for adoption or other permanent placement.
- ✓ ***Expanded adoption outreach efforts.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should recommend to the Legislature and the Governor ways to expand outreach efforts to adoptive parents and further streamline the adoption process for children in foster care.
- ✓ ***Improved postadoption support*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should be directed to study and recommend to the Legislature and the Governor ways to improve post-adoption support for children and reduce the reentry of adopted children into the foster care system.

Finding 13: Programs to support reunified families or support successful permanent placements are insufficient. Too frequently permanent placements fail because support services are terminated when children leave foster care.

To reduce the number of children returning to foster care, the State needs to develop adequate support services for children leaving the system. DSS reports that between 6,000 and 8,000 children return to foster care each year.¹³ A study of children exiting foster care indicated that almost one-fourth of the children returned within three years.¹⁴ A significant portion of the foster care caseload could be eliminated if foster care reentry could be prevented.

Recommendation 13: The Undersecretary should develop a strategy for improving the success rate of permanent placements. The strategy should include:

- ✓ ***Development of service standards.*** The Undersecretary of Child Services should study strategies for successfully reunifying families and supporting adoptions, and develop protocols and service standards to reduce reentry into foster care.

- ✓ **Recommendations for improvement** Based on the application of these protocols, the Undersecretary of Child Services should recommend to policy-makers additional steps the State should take to support reunified and adoptive families. The measures should be as customized as possible and cost-effectively reduce the future public costs associated with the persistent problems of children who were in foster care.

Finding 14: The State puts its investment and foster youth at risk by failing to help children “aging out” of the child welfare system to successfully transition to self-sufficiency.

In California foster care eligibility is generally terminated at age 18 and is extended to age 19 under limited circumstances. Aside from testimony at public hearings, case studies offered by social service agencies, and a few academic investigations, little is known about what happens to foster youth after they leave foster care. Still, the consensus is that many of these youth are ill-prepared to take care of themselves. A study of Wisconsin foster youth found that in the 12 to 18 months after leaving foster care most youth experienced significant problems managing their lives.¹⁵ Many fell prey to victimization and abuse or ended up in the criminal justice system. The State and the foster youth would be better served if these youth were assisted in the transition to independent adulthood, as has been proposed by recent legislation.

Recommendation 14: The Governor and Legislature should enact legislation to assist youth in the transition from foster care to independent living. Components should include:

- ✓ **Expanded transitional services.** More transitional support is needed for youth aging out of foster care, particularly in housing, education, employment, and health services. Public non-profit organizations such as “Pride Industries,” which employs CalWORKs beneficiaries and people with developmental disabilities, could be called on to help foster youth transition into the workplace and adulthood.
- ✓ **Extension of the age cap.** The State should extend foster care eligibility through age 21 as long as these youth are enrolled in high school, GED, or vocational/technical programs full time and make diligent efforts toward completion.

- ✓ ***Earmark scholarship funding.*** The State should assist former foster youth interested in pursuing higher education through scholarships or tuition forgiveness. The Student Aid Commission and the Office of Child Services should administer the scholarships, track scholarship recipients, and report to the Legislature on outcomes of foster youth.

- ✓ ***Track outcomes and mentor when needed.*** The State should monitor emancipating youth and intensify mentoring and other assistance to those struggling with their independence. Based on this monitoring, the State should assess the effectiveness of foster care programs and transitional services.

Conclusion

Each case of child abuse is a personal tragedy. Taken together, child abuse is a social malady with far-reaching consequences for all Californians. To reduce the number of children in foster care, the State must reduce the need for foster care, shorten the time children are in foster care, and prevent children from returning to foster care. The State should fulfill this obligation with the same dedication and persistence that would be expected of a good parent. It is past time for policy-makers to dedicate the will and resources and to create the management structure necessary to comprehensively respond to this problem.

Notes

- ¹ Foster care count on June 30, 1998. California Department of Social Services (DSS), Foster Care Information System, *FCI 520*.
- ² Barbara Needell et al., *Performance Indicators for Child Welfare Services in California: 1996* (Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley, School of Social Welfare, Child Welfare Research Center), 7.
- ³ California Department of Finance, Performance Review Unit, *A Performance Review: California's Child Welfare System* (Sacramento: Apr. 1997), v.
- ⁴ Karoly, *Investing in Our Children, What We Know and Don't Know About the Cost and Benefits of Early Childhood Intervention* (RAND, 1998), 88. Mark E. Courtney and Irving Piliavin, *Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months after leaving Out-of-Home Care*, Revised (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Aug. 1998). U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers* (Apr. 1999), 1.
- ⁵ See, for example, Julia H. Littell and John R. Schuerman, *A Synthesis of Research on Family Preservation and Family Reunification Programs*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children, May 1995). And Karoly, *Investing in Our Children*.
- ⁶ California DSS, *County workload reports*, 1996.
- ⁷ Jill Duerr Berrick, Ph.D., *The Tender Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- ⁸ This figure reflects the 1997 status of children entering foster care in 1993. Needell et al., *Performance Indicators for Child Welfare Services in California: 1997* (Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley, School of Social Welfare, Child Welfare Research Center), 86.
- ⁹ Marjorie Kelly, Deputy Director Children and Families Services Division, California DSS, written testimony, Little Hoover Commission Public Hearing (19 Nov. 1998), 5.
- ¹⁰ Elaine Bush, Director California Alcohol and Drug Programs, testimony, Little Hoover Commission Public Hearing (October 22, 1998).
- ¹¹ Paula K. Jaudes, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 19 (1995), 1065-1075. And C.B. McCaula, *The Future of Children* 1 (1991), 61.
- ¹² Marjorie Kelly, Deputy Director Children and Families Services Division, California DSS, written testimony, Little Hoover Commission Public Hearing (19 Nov. 1998).
- ¹³ Needell et al. (1997), 7.
- ¹⁴ Needell et al. (1997), 121.
- ¹⁵ Courtney and Pilavin.