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May 9, 2006

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The Honorable Karen Bass
Member, California State Assembly
State Capitol, Room 2117
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: SUPPORT FOR ASSEMBLY BILL 2216 - Child Welfare Leadership and Performance Accountability Act of 2006

Dear Assemblymember Bass:

The Little Hoover Commission supports AB 2216, as amended April 19, 2006, the measure you have authored to improve outcomes for foster youth. The Commission has examined the state's foster care system four times in the past 20 years. Its overwhelming concern remains that there is no one person or agency at the state level with responsibility and authority for children in foster care.

In its most recent study, *Still In Our Hands: A Review of Efforts to Reform Foster Care in California*, the Commission found that sporadic leadership, ineffective management and a lack of accountability were compromising the effectiveness of any reforms under way. State and county officials had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on consultants, staff time and travel to meet, explore options, debate reforms, champion legislation, defeat legislation and lament the lack of progress. But those actions had not yielded the direction or leadership that would give anyone confidence that real reform was progressing.

The Commission concluded that it is imperative for the governor and Legislature to clarify who is responsible for the children and families in the foster care system. Without that clarity, millions of dollars and millions of hours will continue to be wasted.

The Commission recommended creating a state structure that can bring leadership and accountability at the state level as an essential first step toward wholesale reform. Specifically:

- ✓ Designate a leader within the governor's administration — an Undersecretary of Health and Human Services Agency — and ensure that leader has the appropriate authority and guidance to reform the foster care system. That leader should be held accountable for improvements.
- ✓ Transform California's foster care ombudsman into a Child Welfare Inspector General who would be vested with the authority to investigate complaints and evaluate local foster care agencies, and who would report to a state-level oversight board described below.
- ✓ Create an independent State Child Welfare Oversight Board with the mandate and tools needed to monitor performance, document challenges and recommend reforms within the foster care system.

Page Two
May 9, 2006

Assembly Bill 2216, as amended April 19, 2006, reflects the Commission's recommendations by establishing the foster care ombudsperson as an independent entity within the California Health and Human Services Agency. The measure also would establish the Child Welfare Council, which would be responsible for improving the collaboration and processes of the multiple agencies that serve children and youth in the child welfare and foster care systems. For these reasons, the Commission will actively support AB 2216.

If you feel my presence and testimony at a policy or fiscal committee hearing would be helpful, please let me know and I will make every attempt to be available.

Sincerely,

Stuart Drown
Executive Director

c: Commissioners