

**Confirmation Hearing for John A. Wagner, Director
California Department of Social Services
Wednesday, April 2, 2008
California Capitol, Room 113
Sacramento, CA**

President Perata and Members of the Senate Rules Committee:

Good Afternoon. My name is John Wagner.

First of all, I want to thank all of you for allowing me to come before you today as I seek confirmation as the Director of the California Department of Social Services.

The mission of CDSS is to “serve, aid and protect vulnerable and needy children and adults in ways that strengthen and preserve families, encourage personal responsibility, and foster independence.”

How fortunate I feel to be a public servant, heading an amazing Department, with such a significant mission.

To be honest, there are few challenges greater than those that face our social services system day in and day out in California. And like California, most state systems are striving to deal with these challenges in a shrinking fiscal environment at the same time the federal government is facing similar constraints. I am sure we will discuss some of those challenges in this meeting today.

But like all of you whom I’ve had the opportunity to meet, we are not here in public service because these challenges don’t exist—we are here because these challenges do exist. We are here to tackle these challenges and in so doing, to make a difference in the lives of millions of individuals and families who come to social services for assistance.

I and each of the Department’s 4,200 employees endeavor to do our best each and every day to address these challenges.

I can think of no other place I’d rather be. Though probably the largest and most complex, most dynamic and diverse social services system in the country, California’s system presents innumerable opportunities to build

upon the great work that many of my predecessors—and many of you—laid down well before my arrival.

Our efficacy will be dependent upon strong partnerships...partnerships both within and beyond state government, united in a commitment to those we serve.

One recent achievement and example of the importance of these partnerships has been the successful implementation of AB 1331, passed by the Legislature and signed by Gov. Schwarzenegger in 2007. Because of our efforts and successful negotiations with the Social Security Administration, disabled California foster youths will now be able to apply for federal disability benefits well before they “age-out” of our foster care system. Until now, these youths were unable to apply for these benefits until a month before their departure from foster care, virtually guaranteeing a gap in benefits given the Social Security Administration’s processing timeframe.

We know all too well the negative outcomes these youths will face without access to such important benefits. One study found nearly 40% would be homeless or at-risk of homelessness soon after leaving foster care. In addition to the significant human cost that this represents, it also puts significant fiscal pressures on counties bearing the extensive costs of this homelessness—whether it be in providing shelter, hospital emergency room care or public safety costs.

But this past January we received notification from the Social Security Administration, accepting the position CDSS put forward based on a process the Legislature and sponsors like the Burton Foundation proposed, allowing earlier applications for disability assistance. This is a huge victory for these, our foster youths.

Should I be confirmed, I look forward to continuing to build upon these partnerships and working with the Legislature, counties, foundations, and others, to ensure the California Department of Social Services is one of the best social services systems in the country.

I thank you again for your time today in considering my appointment. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.