

The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636):

Improving Results for Children and Youth in California

BY BARBARA NEEDELL AND KEN PATTERSON
EDITED BY LAURIE SLOTHOWER AND CATHY SENDERLING

Rose's Story

Rose is only six hours old when she meets her first social worker. Exposed to heroin before birth, she cries constantly and doesn't like to be touched. A nurse at the hospital calls Child Protective Services (CPS) and, after a thorough investigation, the social worker decides that Rose and her older sister are not safe at home. The social worker is successful in finding foster parents who are trained specially to care for drug-exposed infants. The social worker checks on Rose and her sister every month, facilitates visitation with family members and provides detailed reports to the court.

Meanwhile, Rose's mother agrees to go through substance abuse treatment and to take parenting classes. The social worker is determined to find help for Rose's mother so their family can be reunited. However, he finds that there is a six week waiting list for drug treatment programs and a lack of service providers in the neighborhood. Rose and her sister will have to stay in foster care until their mother can find help.

"Prior to AB 636, the state of California did not even track outcomes for foster children, let alone assure good ones. Multiple agencies at the state and local level, each assigned a different piece of foster children's broken lives, rarely talked to one another. Under the new AB 636 compliance review system, these agencies will coordinate their individual efforts and value the contribution each makes to the well-being of each child in a continuing cycle of improvement."

— Darrell Steinberg,
California State
Assemblymember

POLICY BRIEF

WhatWorks



“AB 636 has given us a laser-like focus on what works and the measurement tools that will continue to illuminate our progress...”

— James T. Beall,
Santa Clara County
Board of Supervisors

positive outcomes

Rose’s mother is finally accepted into a treatment program but fails to complete the course, becomes depressed about her inability to find a job or place to live and is unable to demonstrate that she can meet the basic needs of her family. As a result, the social worker is unable to recommend reunification and the children must remain in foster care. Although the foster parents are dedicated to the children, Rose’s extensive rehabilitation needs and her sister’s growing educational and mental health issues prove too much for them to handle. The social worker is forced to separate the girls, sending each to a different foster home.

By now so much time has passed that the law requires the court to begin planning for permanent placements for the two girls, either through guardianship or adoption. Despite the intervention of Child Protective Services (CPS), Rose and her sister face a future without a connection to their biological mother, their extended family or perhaps even each other.

What does this have to do with me?

Rose’s story is based on real-life situations. California’s child welfare system touches thousands of children like Rose — more than 175,000 children a day and 700,000 children a year. Over seven percent of the state’s children will have some contact with this system each year. On any given day, nearly 90,000 children are living in out-of-home care, staying in group homes, with relatives or with foster families. Society has an interest in protecting children, in breaking the cycle of violence and in treating the issues within families that create abuse and neglect. Children who are safe, healthy and well nurtured are more likely to grow into caring and productive adults and better parents.

Despite the years of training, professional dedication and best intentions of social workers, court-appointed attorneys, special advocates and others in the child welfare system who carefully work to abide by the laws and regulations proscribed by the state and federal government, California is failing to achieve the positive outcomes necessary. Too many of California’s

children are without the security of a stable, permanent home. Too many of California’s families return time and again to the child welfare system without receiving the services they need. When families return to the child welfare system, often their problems have escalated.

Children are born into and belong in families. They seldom thrive without belonging to a family unit. It is important for California to ensure that each child is safe and healthy and that each has a permanent family. For many of the children who enter the child welfare system the outcome of a safe and permanent home becomes a reality. In fact, in recent years about a third of the children removed from their homes for the first time successfully and safely return to live with their families within 12 months, and more than half return home within 24 months. However, despite the efforts to return children safely to their homes and reunite them with their families, many will either reenter foster care or remain there for an extended period of time.

For children who live out their youth in foster care and leave when they reach the age of emancipation, usually at age 18, the challenges are daunting. According to a national survey published in 1992 by Westat, Inc., within two-and-a-half to four years after leaving foster care, one-fourth of former foster youth are homeless, nearly half are unemployed and 42 percent have already fathered or given birth to a child.¹ These youth often become dependent on other public systems for support and services resulting in enormous costs to taxpayers — not to mention the human toll in terms of unfulfilled lives. Society can prevent these staggering costs by supporting improved services and supports for the children and families who come into contact with the child welfare system.

California, like every other state, has an urgent need to improve its child welfare system. If you are a policymaker, practitioner or advocate who serves California’s children and families, we hope this brief will help you understand the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) and how it supports the ongoing reform of our child welfare system.

What is the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636)?

California is in the midst of major changes geared toward improving results for children and youth. Implementation of the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) of 2001, also known as Assembly Bill 636, has been a major step toward improving child welfare services. The law, authored by California State Assemblymember Darrell Steinberg, emerged from growing concerns among legislators and child welfare stakeholders that existing accountability systems have focused too much on the process of providing child welfare services and not enough on the results. The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) provides the legal framework for measuring and monitoring each county's performance in ensuring the safety, permanence and well-being of children. The new system builds upon standards established by the federal government, and adds other outcome and accountability measures deemed appropriate by California.

The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) legislatively redefines how counties will be held accountable. By tracking and measuring the results achieved for children, counties will be able to improve the way they serve children and families in each community. The act also:

- Supports state and county partnerships.
- Requires counties to publicly share their results for children and families and collaborate with community partners.
- Requires county-specific system improvement plans.
- Encourages interagency coordination and shared responsibility for outcomes.

"Prior to AB 636, the state of California did not even track outcomes for foster children, let alone assure good ones," said Steinberg. "Multiple agencies at the state and local level, each assigned a different piece of foster children's broken lives, rarely talked to one another. Under the new AB

636 compliance review system, these agencies will coordinate their individual efforts and value the contribution each makes to the well-being of each child in a continuing cycle of improvement."


The new process, put into place in January of 2004, provides counties with data on child outcomes every quarter and requires accountability for efforts to improve those outcomes. Since then, counties have been working on self-assessments, identifying strengths and areas needing improvement. Counties are now developing system improvement plans, which outline the strategies and actions needed to improve their systems of care.

What are the outcomes measured?

- First and foremost, children are protected from abuse and neglect.
- Children are safely maintained in their own homes whenever possible and appropriate.
- Children have permanence and stability in their living situations.
- The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.
- Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.
- Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.
- Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.
- Youth emancipating from foster care are prepared to transition to adulthood.

Why is the act important?

Beginning this year, county Boards of Supervisors are required to approve local child welfare agencies' efforts to implement the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636). County agencies must collaborate with community partners in a bold effort to increase the effectiveness of shared efforts to protect children and ensure their well-being.



"We have long recognized the important impact community partners can have on protecting and serving vulnerable children and families. The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) enables us not only to share the responsibilities, but also the success of improved outcomes for the families that we all seek to serve."

— Frank Mecca,
Executive Director,
County Welfare Directors
Association of California

Accountability

The process of reviewing, debating and approving self-improvement plans in local communities signifies an end to the isolation of child welfare agencies from the community, and promises to usher in a new era of openness and shared responsibility.

Since the 1960s, government programs have focused on informing the public about the signs of child maltreatment and how to report concerns to local child abuse hotlines, but little has been done to educate the public about getting involved when child abuse or neglect occurred within their own neighborhood, church, school or extended family. This has left the distinct if unspoken impression that, if citizens did their duty by calling the child abuse hotline, the problem would be resolved.

This public impression has been reinforced by strict confidentiality statutes that forbid public agencies from disclosing information about the victims or perpetrators of child maltreatment. As a result, public child welfare agencies came to be viewed as isolated, aloof and unaccountable. When the tragedy of child death from abuse or neglect occurred, confidentiality statutes and policies prohibited public agency information disclosure, thus heightening public distrust.

Some public agencies have been working for many years to share resources and to include family and community members in child welfare case planning. The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) formalizes this trend by having the community and Boards of Supervisors approve each county's plan to improve its child welfare system.

A NATIONAL EMPHASIS ON OUTCOMES:

Federal Child and Family Services Reviews

While California was in the process of passing the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636), the federal government — which provides funds for approximately half of all child welfare expenditures — was also making changes. In 2001 it implemented a new system for reviewing states' child welfare programs. Previously, these reviews focused heavily on process

measurement, such as whether children were visited periodically, whether court hearings were held on schedule, or whether social workers correctly filled out required paperwork.

The federal government's new approach for reviews recognizes that merely determining whether or not a social worker visits a child is not an indicator that the child is better off as a result.

As in California, the new federal review approach changes the focus from process measures to a set of outcomes for children. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has conducted reviews in every state, examining service delivery and outcomes for children and families served by child protection, foster care, adoption, family preservation, family support and independent living programs. All states have been measured against national standards.

The intent of the federal reviews is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of state performance and to stimulate improvement in results. The federal reviews examine seven outcomes for children and families as well as seven systemic factors. They rely on a variety of sources to analyze each state's performance, including a statewide self-assessment of strengths and areas for improvement, on-site reviews of individual case records, statewide data collected for each of the outcome measures, and dozens of interviews with clients, advocates, community organizations, and representatives of state and local government.

To encourage program improvement, the federal government deliberately set the standards high for the first round of reviews. No state achieved substantial conformity on all measures and every state is implementing a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) that details actions that it will take to improve its performance. States will be re-reviewed periodically to follow their progress and may face federal penalties if they do not improve.

How did California fare in its federal review?

In September 2002 the federal review team conducted on-site reviews in Los Angeles, San Mateo and Stanislaus counties, analyzing 49



child welfare cases, which represented less than one-half of one percent of the state's total caseload.

Ultimately, California did not meet expectations on any of the seven outcomes, and met only one of seven systemic factors. California faces \$18 million in penalties if it does not meet federal requirements by 2005. The state has entered into an agreement with the federal government, detailing in its Program Improvement Plan (PIP) how it will improve its performance. The plan draws upon two interrelated efforts now underway in California.

- Counties and the state are implementing the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) which allows the state to gauge its performance against national standards and measure the performance of counties in other critical outcomes while tracking improvement over time.
- Counties and the state are developing and testing the recommendations of the Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group, a statewide task force that spent three years studying child welfare in California and creating a blueprint for improving the system.² In 2003, the California Department of Social Services selected 11 counties to utilize the Stakeholders Group's recommended evidence-based practices. Other counties are free to adapt these strategies to aid their achievement of improved outcomes for children, as well.

What is California now doing differently?

While the recent federal reviews are a step in the right direction, the process and national data indicators are limited. The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) addresses some of the limitations of the national data indicators and sets up a quality improvement system that provides continuous and long-term accountability that goes beyond the capacity of the federal review. Specifically, the act:

- Is data-driven and monitors results through the statewide child welfare data system that records information regarding all children served.

- Requires counties to collaborate with community partners and encourages interagency coordination and shared responsibility for outcomes.
- Establishes public accountability through Boards of Supervisors' approval of county system improvement plans and the use of regularly published data available on the Internet.
- Redefines accountability by measuring the results rather than the process of providing child welfare services, retaining some key process measures.
- Promotes the sharing of promising practices among counties.
- Requires counties to develop system improvement plans that dovetail with the goals to which the state has agreed in the federal Program Improvement Plan (PIP) and that are also based on a comprehensive analysis of each county's strengths, challenges, issues and past performance.

How does California's data collection differ from the federal government's?

When national standards for child welfare were created, limitations of available federal data made it impossible to follow all children through their entire experience in the child welfare system. As a result, information is often incomplete and can be misleading.

California has supplemented national standards with additional measures to include data on all its children throughout their time in the child welfare system. This enables the state to review the national standards and also to look at performance in ways that tell us much more of what we need to know. With this expanded approach California can measure outcomes more accurately by looking at:

- Point-in-time data (e.g., how many children are in foster care today).



"For the first time, AB 636 gives us the kind of objective information we need for strategic planning that will improve the lives of children and families."

— John Cullen, Director,
Contra Costa County
Employment and Human
Services Department

- Entry cohorts (for example, how many children entered foster care and how many were reunified over time).
- Exit cohorts (for example, how many children were reunified and how long they were in foster care).

The graph below illustrates the importance of data collection that follows all children from entry to exit from the child welfare system.



The 10 horizontal bars represent foster care episodes for 10 different children: five relatively long episodes of living in foster care and five relatively short episodes. The top bar shows a child entering care soon after January 1, 2000 and remaining in care when data was collected on January 1, 2002.

The bar below it shows a child who entered care in May of 2000 and exited a few months after that. If we produce a report on January 1, 2001 about who is in foster care (see vertical bar), only five of the 10 children will be represented. Of those five, four will be those with long episodes and only one with a short episode.

Using point-in-time data alone to measure outcomes does not tell the complete story (e.g., that half the children stay a long time and half a short time). Similarly, using only data relative to children exiting the system tells us nothing about the actual rate of exit. To understand performance fully, it is necessary to have data from start to finish, for all children in the child welfare system.

What are the requirements of the act?

The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) has provided counties with the necessary tools to measure their progress and to achieve the shared vision that “every child in California will live in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities.” When this bill became law on October 10, 2001, it put into motion several actions:

- The California Health and Human Services Agency was required to convene a workgroup to establish measurable outcomes for foster youth and their families.
- The California Department of Social Services was required to establish the California Child and Family Services Reviews system through which counties will be monitored using the outcome measures.
- The California Department of Social Services was required to identify and promote best practices and procedures in the child welfare system, and establish uniform policies and procedures wherever appropriate.
- The California Department of Social Services is required to review and ensure compliance of county child welfare systems, and to provide assistance to help counties achieve specific benchmarks or implement best practices.
- The California Department of Social Services is required to report annually to legislative budget committees its progress in planning for federal reviews and implementing the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636). The initial three-year cycle for implementation began in January 2004.

What are the key components of the act?

QUARTERLY DISTRIBUTION OF COUNTY DATA: RESULTS IN BLACK AND WHITE

Under the act, data on child welfare outcomes are collected and updated in quarterly reports that are provided to the counties by the California Department of Social Services.³

California's new measures for safety, permanence and well-being go beyond those required by the federal government and more fully track the performance of the child welfare system in achieving positive outcomes for children from start to finish. The quarterly data reports are the starting point of a careful examination of county performance, considered in light of each county's special characteristics and challenges. The measures in the California Child and Family Services Reviews system include specific indicators on such important issues as:

- **Recurrence of maltreatment:** Are children mistreated again after they come to the attention of the child welfare system?
- **Abuse in foster care:** Are children mistreated while they are in foster care?
- **Time to reunification:** How long do children stay in foster care before they can safely return home?
- **Time to adoption:** How long do children have to wait to be adopted?
- **Placement stability:** How many times do foster children move?
- **Foster care re-entry:** How many children who have left foster care are mistreated again and return to foster care?
- **Keeping siblings together:** Do siblings stay together when they are in foster care?

COUNTY SELF-ASSESSMENTS

To facilitate the evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, service gaps and needs, the act requires all counties to undertake self-assessments based on data provided by the quarterly reports, and to examine their work to improve outcomes and address the challenges that remain.

The first county self-assessments were sent to the state on June 30, 2004. Each includes information on county demographics and an analysis and interpretation of outcome data, followed by a review of agency characteristics, workforce, caseload, resources, funding, technological capacities and related information. In addition, counties are required to describe their performance on the following seven systemic factors:

- **Automated system capability:** Does the county adequately use the system that tracks all children in foster care and provide necessary demographic data?
- **Case review process:** Do parents participate in the development of a case plan? Are there timely periodic reviews?
- **Foster/adoptive parent recruitment and retention:** How effective has the county been in recruiting and retaining foster and adoptive families? Have adequate standards been established and maintained?
- **Quality assurance:** How effective is the child welfare agency in ensuring safety, permanence and well-being for children served?
- **Service array:** Do sufficient services exist to help keep children safe at home, return them safely to their homes or find them alternative placement homes?
- **Staff/provider training:** How effective is training for child welfare staff, group home providers and foster and adoptive parents?
- **Agency collaborations:** How effective is the child welfare agency in consulting, collaborating and coordinating services with other public agencies and community stakeholders?

Key components



“The PQCR had a good representation of supervisors, workers and outside peers... They elicited suggestions for what we were doing right and what services or changes could be made to allow workers to assist their families to have a higher level of success.”

— Jill Johnson,
Social Worker,
Riverside County

PEER QUALITY CASE REVIEWS (PQCRS): PEERS HELPING PEERS

As part of the act’s commitment to continuous improvement, each county is required to review at least one element of its work that needs improvement. With these peer quality case reviews (PQCRs), a county randomly selects cases that pertain to this area of improvement, and conducts interviews with its social workers, staff from other counties and state staff present. The structured, interactive nature of the PQCR interviews allows the county to generate qualitative information that provides an in-depth analysis of case results and promotes information sharing that helps build the capacity of social workers and other staff.

For example, San Bernardino County completed the state’s first PQCR in March of 2004. Joined by reviewers from neighboring Riverside and Imperial counties and the Southern Regional Academy, county supervisors and social workers looked at family involvement in case planning. The team interviewed more than 90 workers and initiated three focus groups of social work supervisors. “We found the process to be challenging and rewarding. It requires a huge commitment of time and effort, but the rewards are invaluable in terms of cross-training and gaining new perspectives,” said Kathy Watkins, legislative program manager for San Bernardino County. “Workers told us they felt we listened to them, and the qualitative information we gathered helped us develop a much more balanced and informed county self-assessment.”

COUNTY SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT PLANS (SIPS): CREATING A BETTER FUTURE

As mandated by the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636), county system improvement plans (SIPs) are agreements between each county and the state on how the county will improve its child welfare system. Counties must describe milestones, timeframes, measurable goals for outcomes and systemic factors that need improvement.

SIPs can also include an analysis of findings from the PQCR. Counties are encouraged to emphasize prevention strategies with community partners. In partnership with the state, each county will negotiate the degree of required improvements, with the state acting as the final authority in disputes.





NOTES FROM THE FIELD: COUNTY ASSESSMENTS AND PLANS

A few examples give an idea of the range of different issues that have been targeted by county self-assessments and system improvement plans.

TEHAMA COUNTY

The county child welfare department is reaching out to its community partners to reduce the rate of children in foster care. The agency's county self-assessment revealed that it carried a caseload of 193 children in foster care, representing 13.1 per 1,000 children in the population. The statewide caseload rate is 9.2 per 1,000. Administrators believe the increased rate is partly due to the lack of community programs available to serve families at risk of child neglect or abuse. "We want to reduce the number of out-of-home placements and will be working with the community to increase our capacity to provide home- and neighborhood-based services, thus allowing children to remain safely at home," says Randi Gottlieb, program manager for the Tehama County Department of Social Services.

LOS ANGELES COUNTY

The county self-assessment team reviewed safety and prevention data as it related to children and youth entering foster care for the first time. The initial review of the data showed these "first entries" into foster care declining by 15.2 percent between 1998 and 2002, seemingly good news for a county that includes one in 10 foster children in the nation. However, in probing the data and breaking it down by race and ethnicity, team members learned that African American children were entering foster care at a disproportionately higher rate than other children. This knowledge, made possible by data reports now mandated through the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636), has enabled county officials and community members partnering with the county, to better understand the multidimensional nature of child welfare and target resources and supports accordingly.

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

The county child welfare department utilized funds it received from the California Department of Social Services to survey residents of targeted communities with the highest number of child abuse referrals. Partner agencies hired community members to go door-to-door to ask residents about their concerns and needs, with interviews conducted in the native language of residents. More than 2,000 residents participated in the survey. County district offices have used this information to improve services for children and families in need.

"The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services continues to work on creating more positive outcomes for children and families, and AB 636 will assist us in providing the framework for better outcomes. In addition, enhancing our community partnerships will only help the Department provide more vital services to all of the children and families we serve."

— Dr. David Sanders,
Director, Los Angeles County
Department of Children and
Family Services

“The community is very concerned about child safety. This process has the potential to unite public, private and community assets to do something we all believe in. It’s such an inclusive process... we have everybody represented.”

— Wilmer Brown,
Director of Family
Services, Mutual
Assistance Network
of Del Paso Heights,
Sacramento

How are communities involved?

Counties are encouraged to be inclusive when developing self-assessment teams. With the county child welfare department as the lead, other core members include county health, mental health, probation and local education agencies, foster youth, parents and Native American tribes. Counties are required to consult with Regional Training Academy staff, juvenile court officers, law enforcement, court-appointed special advocates, county drug and alcohol abuse experts and labor representatives. Service providers such as CalWORKS, developmental services, domestic violence prevention providers, workforce investment boards and housing authorities are also welcomed.

A county’s system improvement plan, like the self-assessment, cannot be written in isolation, but must be approved by the County Board of Supervisors and be made available for public comment.

Child welfare reform efforts in California

The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) represents a comprehensive approach to measure and evaluate child welfare performance beyond what is measured in the federal review process. Certainly it will provide useful information in complying with California’s federal Program Improvement Plan (PIP). To improve their outcomes, counties will incorporate many child welfare reform efforts already underway. The Schwarzenegger administration, the state legislature and the County Welfare Directors Association have prioritized three major child welfare system improvements for 2004 and 2005:

- Development of a statewide safety assessment process to ensure that all counties use consistent and fair assessment and evaluation procedures to determine if a child is being abused or neglected. This improvement addresses one of California’s chief shortcomings and is a key requirement of California’s federal PIP.

- Improvements to the child abuse hotline response system. Through the establishment of a triage system at the child abuse hotline, social workers will be able to better ensure that children and families get the services that they need. About 92 percent of cases reported to child welfare offices do not qualify for government intervention, yet many of these children and families need support. Through a revamped intake process, counties will be able to involve community partners and organizations in a collaborative effort to ensure children and families receive the support they need.
- Promotion of permanency and successful transitions for children through individualized, inclusive, team-based planning processes throughout their time in the child welfare system.

In addition, a number of other efforts hold promise. They include:

- *Family to Family*, an initiative developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and also supported by the Stuart Foundation, is being implemented in 22 counties that represent 84 percent of California’s children in foster care. The four essential components are: community partnerships; recruitment, training and support of foster parents; team decision-making; and self-evaluation. The use of data — the cornerstone of the California review process — allows community partners to focus on neighborhoods with the highest concentration of CPS referrals and entries into foster care. Using *Family to Family* strategies, children who must be removed from the home can be placed with foster families in their neighborhoods. www.aecf.org/initiatives/familytofamily.
- The *CalWORKS/Child Welfare Partnership Project* provides training and technical assistance to 13 California counties to coordinate services to families involved in CalWORKS’ Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or in child welfare systems. Also known as “Linkages,” the project helps counties improve services for children and families through coordinated screening, assessment, case planning and aftercare. www.ccrwf.org/calworks.



- The *California Permanency for Youth Project*, a three-year program supported by the Stuart Foundation and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, is dedicated to ensuring that all youth leave the child welfare system with a permanent lifelong connection with a caring adult. The project collaborates with the courts, group homes, foster families, adoption agencies and the child welfare system to help them achieve permanent connections for foster youth in Alameda, Monterey, San Mateo and Stanislaus counties. The project also works to improve public policy, increase training and raise public awareness on the issue. It tracks its success by utilizing data on older youth in foster care and on exits from care. www.cpy.org.

Does local, state and federal financing support the act and its improvements?

California's child welfare program has never been funded sufficiently to comply with federal and state performance mandates. For example, a legislatively mandated study released in 2000 from the California Department of Social Services confirmed this when it found that approximately twice as many social workers were needed in California to implement all state and federally-required mandates.⁴ More recently, new state and federal requirements have continued to assign additional responsibilities to the child welfare system with little new funding to accomplish these requirements.

The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) requires California's counties to improve outcomes for children and families. While the federal government is the main source of funding for states, its principal source of funds for child welfare (Title IV-E of the Social Security Act) only permits use of those funds *after* a child is removed from the home to meet every day needs such as food and shelter. In doing so, the federal government provides limited financial support for services to prevent child abuse, to reunite abused and neglected children with their families, or to provide follow-up support for families — the very services that can improve

outcomes for children and families and ultimately conserve tax dollars.

In concert with a growing national consensus that significant reforms are needed to reform federal financing of child welfare, the California Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group has recommended major changes in this critical funding stream to the states. Separately, a national commission appointed by the Pew Charitable Trusts and led by former members of Congress has recommended sweeping changes to federal financing.

Resources are needed in several major areas to ensure that counties provide effective services that enhance the safety, permanency and well-being of children. In particular, county child welfare systems need more flexible resources to:

- Implement prevention, intervention and family preservation programs.
- Expand placement and post-permanency options for children.
- Reduce child welfare workers' caseloads so that they can provide better services to children and families.

One way to increase resources for these improvements is through a proposed federal Title IV-E waiver demonstration project that permits greater flexibility in the way the state uses its federal dollars. If the waiver is approved by the federal government, participating counties will be able to create a more responsive array of services that can yield savings by placing fewer children in out-of-home care, facilitating timely reunifications, reducing dependence on expensive options like group homes, and developing performance-based contracts.

By eliminating cumbersome federal eligibility requirements that are not only outdated but prove time-consuming for staff, more resources can be spent providing direct services for children and families.

Finally, there are low funding caps for federal drug and alcohol treatment programs and other services that help prevent child abuse and reunify families. California counties typically exhaust their

“Clearly identified results and indicators make it easier for public-private funders to work together. We now can better align our resources towards a common end.”
— Miryam Choca, Director, California Strategies, Casey Family Programs, an operating foundation

Financing

“Our kids deserve to have the whole community come together to wrap their arms around families in crisis. I am so excited that the churches and public agencies are now working together.”
— Reverend Yaahn Hunter, New Faith Cathedral, Church of God in Christ, Richmond, California

annual allocations for these types of services in the first three months of the year. If funding were to be increased or uncapped, it could be used to serve additional families and improve county and state performance on their respective outcome measures.

Better coordination and a sense of joint responsibility across all of the programs that touch the lives of vulnerable families will also help to improve results.

A step into the future: what happens to Rose?

How will things be different as a result of the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636)?

The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) has set in motion a new approach for improving child welfare services in our state. For the first time, counties have access to data that child welfare officials and community members can use to track the results of their efforts and to implement improvements that directly benefit children and families.

In addition, the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) establishes a new framework in which to provide services and promote children’s safety in communities. Under the act, communities and county child welfare systems are mandated to work together to ensure that California’s families have the capacity to provide for their children’s needs.

As counties partner with community organizations, major changes can occur. Consider the case of Rose, and how she fares in an improved child welfare system. In our scenario, Rose was identified at birth as being drug-exposed. Under the reforms begun through the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636), the hospital, now a partner and working in conjunction with Child Protective Services (CPS), is better able to assist in finding help for Rose and her mother. CPS, for its part, now collaborates with agencies in the neighborhood to provide adequate drug treatment and counseling for Rose’s mother. Prompted by related reform efforts that

promote expanded involvement in case planning, Rose’s social worker reaches out to arrange a meeting where all those involved in Rose’s care — her mother, a neighbor, an aunt, the minister — create a plan for keeping Rose and her sister safe and identifying the services that Rose’s mother needs. Because of improved CPS and community collaboration, Rose’s mother will be connected with a family resource center that introduces her to other young mothers.

Rose and her mother are now surrounded by a stronger system of community support, which provides the stability needed for Rose’s mother to step up to her responsibilities as a mother and a community member. Rose has an improved chance to grow strong mentally and physically. The presence and connection to attentive, skilled providers helps Rose’s mother remain drug-free and be more capable of providing care for her child.

In short, Rose now has a better chance of living safely within her own family as a result of government and community agencies that collaborate in the provision of services and which use ongoing data reports both to identify community needs and target supports where they are most needed. As a result, taxpayer support is used more effectively — to help keep a child with her family provided it can be done safely, to identify and address family and child safety and well-being issues early and before they become crises, to avoid expensive institutional or foster care placement and to use limited resources where they can do the most good.

Ultimately, the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) provides the foundation for communities to develop a set of strategies for improving the lives of children in their communities. It begins the long process of formalizing practices and adopting policies that already exist in a number of California counties and which we know bring us the results we seek to achieve. In the end, it will be the counties and their communities that implement the process set out in the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636), and who, with hard work and dedication, can realize the vision of a cohesive network of services and support for children.



What can I do to help?

The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) is a critical step in reforming child welfare services for California's most vulnerable children and families. The report by the Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group identifies evidence-based strategies for improving outcomes for the safety of children and the stability of families through partnerships between California counties, community organizations, and local officials. Local, state and federal policies and funding mechanisms need to provide adequate and flexible support of these innovative approaches. Each of us has a role to play if we are to realize our shared hopes for the future of the children and families in our communities.

"AB 636 has given us a laser-like focus on what works and the measurement tools that will continue to illuminate our progress. We now know that flexible, family-focused services lead to better outcomes for our children and families of color in Santa Clara County."

— James T. Beall, Santa Clara County
Board of Supervisors

- As a **locally elected official**, I can encourage stakeholders to participate in the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) system. I can demonstrate leadership by becoming conversant with the issues related to children in my county and by promoting shared responsibility for their safety and well-being. I can also look for public opportunities to recognize the complexity of child welfare services and acknowledge the dedication of county and community employees. Finally, I can work to ensure that appropriate policies are enacted and investments are allocated to make these reforms a reality.
- As a **social services staff member**, I can become familiar with the child welfare outcomes data for my county. I can raise public awareness of the issues by offering to speak about child welfare reform at community organizations such as family resource centers, faith-based organizations, school districts or service groups. I can encourage and support these organizations

in partnering with my agency. I can use the local child welfare outcomes data to create discussion forums with direct-service staff, community partners and local leaders.

I can explain how these outcomes reflect our chosen model of delivering child protection and child welfare services, and how these outcomes relate to our local communities.

I can encourage dialog between participants about why certain outcomes look as they do and suggest changes in policy, resource distribution or social work practices that might favorably impact those outcomes.

- As someone who works in or with a **community-based organization, faith organization, school district** or other agency concerned with children, I can help by becoming involved with the process in my local community and by providing support and embracing my shared responsibility for improving outcomes. I can make sure my organization is partnering with others to help keep children safe and healthy.
- As an **advocate**, I can play a significant role in facilitating and solidifying reform by helping to increase public understanding of the issues. I can contact my local newspaper or television station and encourage them to cover the reforms being made in child welfare and the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) system.

"Finally! An opportunity to share responsibility through public and private partnerships. Now everyone will be more accountable to children and their families."

— John Reid,
Chief Operating Officer,
Families First

Resources

- California Department of Social Services:
www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/default.htm
- California Permanency for Youth Project:
www.cyp.org
- California State Legislature:
www.leginfo.ca.gov
- CalWORKS Child Welfare Partnership Project:
www.ccrwf.org/calworks
- Child Welfare Research Center,
Center for Social Services Research,
School of Social Welfare, UC Berkeley:
<http://cssr.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/>
- Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group,
*CWS Redesign: The Future of California's
Child Welfare Services*:
www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/default.htm
- County Welfare Directors Association:
www.cwda.org/
- Family to Family, an initiative of the
Annie E. Casey Foundation:
www.aecf.org/initiatives/familytofamily
- Fostering Results:
www.fosteringresults.org/
- Foundation Consortium for California's
Children & Youth:
www.foundationconsortium.org/

About the Authors

Barbara Needell, PhD, is a Research Specialist at the Center for Social Services Research at UC Berkeley and principal investigator of the "Performance Indicators for Child Welfare Services in California" project.

Ken Patterson, MSW, is the director of Stanislaus County Community Services Agency and has been engaged in child welfare system reforms throughout the western United States.

Footnotes

- ¹ Cook, R., *A national evaluation of Title IV-E foster care independent living programs for youth: phase 2* (Rockville, MD: Westat, 1992).
- ² Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group, *CWS Redesign: The Future of California's Child Welfare Services* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Social Services, September 2003). It is available at www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/default.htm.
- ³ See the Center for Social Services Research at UC Berkeley website at <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/Ccfsr.asp> for data summary tables.
- ⁴ California Department of Social Services, *SB 2030 Child Welfare Services Workload Study: Final Report* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Social Services, April 2000). It is at www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/SB2030Chil_287.htm.

The Consortium wants California's children to be safe, healthy and learning each day.

Established in 1991, the Foundation Consortium for California's Children & Youth is a non-partisan resource bringing philanthropy together with community, schools and government to improve public policy and practice. The Consortium is a pooled fund of 19 of California's leading foundations. Foundation members are independent, yet they share common goals and the strategy of public-private partnerships.

Judith K. Chynoweth, Executive Director
Michael Kressner, Communications Coordinator
Bonnie R. Armstrong, Senior Fellow

Acknowledgements

This policy brief has been developed by the County Welfare Directors Association of California and the Foundation Consortium for California's Children & Youth as part of Fostering Results for California's Children, which is funded by Fostering Results. Fostering Results is a national, nonpartisan project to raise awareness of issues facing children in foster care. It is supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts to the Children and Family Research Center at the School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the following individuals who assisted us in the process of conceiving, drafting and editing this policy brief: Sharrell Blakeley, Danna Fabella, Louise Grasmehr, Greta Helm, Jennie Loft, Sasha Minton, Sophie Pettygrove, Joni Pitcl, Jonah Weinberg, Renee Wessels and Lynn Yaney.



POLICY BRIEF

WhatWorks

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Prsrt Std
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 1890
Sacramento, CA



FOUNDATION CONSORTIUM
FOR CALIFORNIA'S CHILDREN & YOUTH

2295 Gateway Oaks Drive
Suite 100
Sacramento CA 95833
916.646.3646
www.foundationconsortium.org
www.promisingpractices.net



CWDA
COUNTY WELFARE
DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION

925 L Street
Suite 1405
Sacramento CA 95814
916.443.1749
www.cwda.org