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# Los Angeles Times

Wednesday, April 16, 2014

LA Times Editorial Board

## Helping relatives help children

Grandparents and others who take in children often are ineligible for the federal funding that goes to non-relative families and group homes. That needs to change.

Enormous public resources go to foster families and group homes, and those expenditures are appropriate because the county and state are the virtual guardians for thousands of abused and neglected children. As such, the state and the county are duty-bound to ensure that the children receive proper care and, despite any mistreatment at home and despite the turmoil of being sent to live with strangers, are put on a pathway toward a successful adulthood.

But Los Angeles County also places thousands more abused or neglected children not with foster families or group homes but with their own grandparents and other relatives, and that's a good thing; numerous studies over many years show that such children do better in the long run than those in foster care — if those family members have the money to properly clothe and care for the children.

The problem is that relative caregivers often are ineligible for the federal funding that goes to non-relative families and group homes, especially if they voluntarily took on the care of their young family members before the child welfare system got involved. They may be eligible for CalWORKS, but they are seldom if ever advised of that fact by the county and are given no assistance in applying. Why not? In part because of bureaucracy: One county department places children in homes, but a different one determines CalWORKS eligibility. Meanwhile, relatives wait too long to get county approval and are too often treated rudely by county workers despite the advantages, including cost savings, of using relatives instead of foster care where possible.

A little funding to allow a child to stay with relatives — \$8,000 or so a year — is a drop in the bucket compared with the more than \$100,000 a year it costs the public to maintain a child in a group home. And because children raised by family members have higher rates of graduation and lower rates of homelessness, drug abuse and arrest as adults, it's smart policy to give grandparents and others living in retirement and on Social Security enough information and money on the front end to buy their young charges clothes and food and to pay for gas or bus fare to get to doctors and parent nights at school.

The Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection wisely argued in its draft final report that funding and services for a child removed from his or her parents should be determined by the child's needs, not by the status of the placement family. State lawmakers are considering a bill — AB 1882 — that would go part of the way toward helping to direct funding to relative caregivers, and it's a good start. But so much more could be accomplished in Los Angeles County if the Board of Supervisors would make child welfare a priority across all county departments and not just at the Department of Children and Family Services.

# San Francisco Chronicle

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Thursday, April 10, 2014

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## Relatives who provide foster care deserve state support

Like other states, California recognizes that the best possible placements for foster children are with their relatives. Giving children who already have experienced trauma the opportunity to stay with other family members gives these youngsters more stability and keeps them connected to their communities.

Unlike other states, California does not provide those relatives with the financial support they need to take care of those children. There's a paradox here. While California prefers to place foster children with their relatives, it provides many kin caregivers significantly less financial support than it offers nonrelative foster parents or group homes. Why not make it easier for relatives to take in their kin? Other states do.

California is the only state that does not provide state funding to relative foster parents. This is an inequity with major effects on the long-term stability of foster children's homes and outcomes. (Relative foster parents are often eager to accept the children into their homes, but then find that they cannot afford to keep them.) It's also an inequity easy for the state to correct.

California currently relies on federal money to reimburse foster parents for the basic costs of caring for the poorest children. Children whose biological parents earn less than the 1996 poverty standard are eligible for federal foster care money, regardless whether they are placed with relatives or nonrelatives. But the 1996 poverty standard is so low that the majority (56 percent) of California's foster children are not eligible for this assistance. The state pays the equivalent amount of support through its own system to nonrelative foster parents - but not to relatives.

The only state support that relatives can access for their new charges is the public assistance available to low-income families with children. Unfortunately, the maximum CalWORKs benefit for a single child is substantially less than the financial support of foster-care benefits.

Plus, not all relative foster care homes are impoverished enough for CalWORKs - even though they may still struggle financially after accepting the children into their homes. "I don't understand why my kids are worth less than other kids," wrote Melody Chapman, a San Diego foster parent, to the nonprofit organization Alliance for Children's Rights. Chapman, who cares for her two special-needs granddaughters, has not been able to save any money for her retirement since taking in the children three years ago.

The Alliance for Children's Rights, along with eight other organizations, is lobbying the Legislature for a statute change that would provide these relatives with the same funding as nonrelative foster parents. They estimate that the change would cost the state about \$30 million per year - not a huge amount, but enough to effect a huge and positive change in the lives of these vulnerable children.

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Yet even that small amount may be too much for California legislators in a cautious election year. State Assemblyman Ken Cooley, D-Rancho Cordova (Sacramento County), tried unsuccessfully to equalize foster care funding last year. This year, he's pushing for a smaller change with AB1882, which would help relative caregivers better access existing state benefits for which they are already eligible.

"It's the art of the possible," Cooley said. "We're still trying to come out of the budget woods."

With so many Californians still struggling, it's understandable why legislators might be cautious about any spending. But some struggling are those who are trying to take care of the state's most vulnerable children - the children who are, after all, the state's responsibility. If every other state in the union acknowledges this responsibility, then California has no excuse.

May, 15, 2014

### Foster Flub: California is the only state to penalize relatives who take in foster kids

By Raheem F. Hosseini

From inside the tunnel slide of a south Davis park, 4-year-old Jasmine belts a scream that could rouse the dead.

Rather than stiffen with parental concern, the child's adopted mother calmly wipes the dirt-speckled hands of her 2-year-old grandnephew, Jeremiah, and smiles. "That's her happy scream," Cecilia Escamilla-Greenwald explains. "I've learned to tell the difference."

Escamilla-Greenwald and husband David Greenwald, editor of the Davis Vanguard, are just two of the thousands of foster-care providers in California and are intimately attuned to a bizarre quirk in the system:



Foster children who are taken in by relatives generally receive a fraction of the aid they would get if placed with complete strangers—nearly \$500 less a month per child in most cases.

California is the only state in the union where this disparity exists, which has its roots in a not-so-grand national bargain. When former President Bill Clinton and a Republican Congress hammered through welfare reform back in 1996, they included a stipulation: The federal government wouldn't pay foster-care benefits if the households the kids were removed from had incomes above the federal poverty level—as it stood 18 years ago.

To put that in context, a family of four making more than \$16,000 a year today wouldn't qualify, says the Alliance for Children's Rights' Reed Connell.

For foster children who aren't federally eligible but live with relatives, every state but California has coughed up the difference. A whopping 36 percent of California's foster children stay with extended family, nearly 21,000 kids in all.

Here in Sacramento County, approximately 25 percent of the 2,800 children who are dependents of the juvenile court live with relatives.

Up to one-half of familial providers are ineligible under federal law, a figure that increases as inflation leaves 1996 further behind. But related caretakers are eligible for CalWORKs, which used to pay relatives the same before massive budget cuts and unaddressed inflation left it reeling.

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By way of example: The state pays \$820 a month to a nonrelative caretaker of a 15-year-old foster child—or what UC Davis determined to be the minimum cost of caring for a foster child with no special needs—but only \$351 a month to a relative provider through CalWORKs.

Additionally, signing up for the program is an arduous process that often requires the help of an attorney, Connell says.

It's this way even though child-welfare experts say foster kids living with kin experience more stability, fewer placement changes and more contact with biological parents and siblings.

“We step up because we want to help kids stay with their families,” says Escamilla-Greenwald, who receives no financial support for Jasmine, Jeremiah and Jeremiah’s older brother, 10-year-old Malachi.

Connell’s organization and other child-advocacy groups are pushing for a legislative fix that would pay all foster caregivers the same, and also give them equal access to additional benefits for children with special needs, another loophole in the state system. But because this is California’s first budget surplus in a while, Connell acknowledges there are other worthy causes angling for attention.

Alliance’s “fall-back position” is Assembly Bill 1882, which would make it easier for relative caregivers to sign up for CalWORKs, but wouldn’t do anything to address the disparity in payments.

Connell is guardedly hopeful of a positive resolution. “We’ve got a lot of ground stir,” he says.

The Greenwalds are luckier than most relative caretakers, who tend to be older, in poorer health and make less money than nonrelative providers. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t tight months, especially with Jeremiah receiving speech therapy and the two older children getting involved in after-school activities.

On this overcast day, Escamilla-Greenwald and her young charges look like any other family. As Jeremiah scales a white ladder that curves into a vicious hump at its peak, “Aunt Cessi” calls out and makes her way to rescue the little fella.

“No, Mom!” Jasmine protests. “He can do it. Watch.”

Laughing, Escamilla-Greenwald positions herself under Jeremiah’s feet. He trembles with sudden fear on the last rung. “You can do it, you can do it,” Escamilla-Greenwald coos, stabilizing his legs.

It takes a few fraught moments, but Jeremiah finally plants himself on solid ground. Then he hops in triumph.

# Los Angeles Times

Tuesday, September 3, 2013

OP-ED

## Families who foster deserve parity

Relatives who care for a child deserve the same benefits as non-related foster parents



Federal financial support for children placed in foster care is based on antiquated rules that have not been updated since 1996, and the bulk of children in foster care in California don't qualify for this federal support. (Wes Bausmith / Los Angeles Times / August 30, 2013)

By Janis Spire, CEO of the Alliance for Children's Rights

*September 3, 2013*

Los Angeles County's child welfare system, as noted recently by this newspaper, is facing a critical shortage of foster homes. But a simple policy shift could go a long way toward eliminating this crisis. We need to provide better support for relatives who step up and become foster parents.

Relatives are the backbone of the county's child welfare system. They care for children with the highest needs at a moment's notice, and they provide stability in an otherwise chaotic system. Relatives can help children in county care remain connected to their families and provide them with a sense of community.

Unfortunately, the system as presently constituted fails to adequately support relatives who take in vulnerable young people.

Federal financial support for children placed in foster care is based on antiquated rules that have not been updated since 1996, and the bulk of children in foster care in California don't qualify for this federal support. The state takes care of those foster children who are ineligible, but only if they live with a non-related foster parent. California refuses to pay the same benefits for children placed with relatives.

What that means is that a relative in California caring for a child receives \$351 a month while a non-related foster parent caring for that same child receives at least \$799 a month, and more if the child has special needs.

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When home placements aren't possible, group homes are generally the next option, but they are far more expensive. The cost per month for placement in a level 12 group home, the type in which most foster kids are placed, is \$8,309. That's \$7,958 more than what it would cost to house that same child with a relative.

To put this in perspective, consider Cara Wright, a college student who, since her parents died, is also foster parent to her three siblings. She receives \$681 a month to provide for the family of four. Purchasing bus passes for the family eats up nearly half of that amount, leaving her with little left to cover other basic necessities for her brothers and sister.

Foster children placed with relatives, are still the state and county's responsibility. Most of these children have been removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect and placed into the care of someone who has met certain standards (which are the same for relatives as they are for any other foster parent). It costs as much for a relative to care for a child as it does for a non-related foster parent. And yet, the children placed with relatives often receive a fraction of the financial support. Private investment from organizations such as the Conrad N. Hilton and Everychild foundations has helped fill in some of the gaps for foster families, but we need a greater public commitment of funds that would make it possible for more relatives to take in children in need.

California law mandates that relatives should be looked to first when trying to find homes for children in county care. Such placements can lessen the trauma and negative emotions experienced by children who have been removed from their parents. Making it financially feasible for more relatives to step up and provide caring homes for kids in need would mean fewer children living in group homes or with strangers. The system needs to support relatives who are willing to step up to the plate.

*Janis Spire is CEO of the Alliance for Children's Rights.*