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STATE CITES NEW CHANGES UNDERWAY TO IMPROVE CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

Schwarzenegger Administration Implements Key Reforms to Help Children

SACRAMENTO – The California Department of Social Services (CDSS), in partnership with the Foundation Consortium for California’s Children and Youth and the County Welfare Directors Association, is making headway with innovative programs and efforts to improve services provided to at-risk children and families in the child welfare system, according to a new report released this week.

The major findings of the report, completed by a partnership of public and private groups working to improve the child welfare system, show that the likelihood of children entering the foster care system for the first time is decreasing and children who enter foster care are exiting the system more quickly.

“Ensuring every child will live in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities is a top priority for the Administration and our department,” said Mary Ault, Deputy Director of Children and Family Services Division, CDSS. “This report reflects the Governor’s commitment of putting children first by continuing to look at ways to improve our child welfare system to benefit the abused, neglected and abandoned children entrusted to our care.”

One of the most substantial and promising improvement efforts underway is the Statewide Outcomes and Accountability System. Implemented by the Schwarzenegger Administration last year, the system allows CDSS to generate quarterly performance reports from county data, which in turn helps each county to keep track and monitor the needs of children in child welfare services. Previously, this capability was non-existent. The State can now continually monitor county improvements in the areas of child safety, permanency and well-being for children and foster youth, which is providing greater accountability in assessing their needs and ensuring their safety.

The Governor also signed a series of foster care legislation this year, including AB 363 (Chu), which goes hand in hand with the accountability system and will assist in identifying funding allocations for the counties to conduct outcome-based improvements in foster care.

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In addition to an estimated \$2.4 billion budgeted for child welfare services in 2005-06, the Administration expanded current year funding by nearly \$27 million and identified the three specific program improvement areas with the potential to make a notable difference for children and families. Eleven counties are developing, testing and implementing program strategies and evaluating outcomes for safety assessment, differential response and permanency.

Titled "Child Welfare System Improvements in California, 2003-2005: Early Implementation of Key Reforms," the report cites new gains for children and youth in State foster care but also emphasizes there's still much work to do. Although it will take time for recent program improvements to reflect themselves in quarterly data reports, the data are showing the following:

- **The likelihood of children entering foster care for the first time is decreasing** – Between 2001 and 2004, there was a 6.4 percent reduction in the incidence of children entering foster care for the first time, despite a 3.4 percent increase in California's child population.
- **The recurrence of child abuse or neglect is decreasing** – Between 2001 and 2004, the percentage of children who experienced a second incident of abuse or neglect within six months of a previous incident declined by 12.4 percent.
- **When children enter foster care, they are now exiting more quickly** – Between 2001 and 2004, the proportion of children who returned home within 12 months increased by 14.4 percent. For those children unable to return home, the proportion of children adopted within 24 months of entering care increased by 56.7 percent.

The report also indicates children today are less likely to enter the foster care system than they were five years ago. Since 2000, there has been a 20.5 percent reduction in the number of children placed in foster care, a significant decline from 104,000 in 2000 to 83,000 in 2005.

"California is making great strides toward ensuring our kids are safe and that they have a great start in life," continued Mary Ault.

A reflection of the strength and commitment of State, county and philanthropic partnerships, the report represents the framework needed to continue moving California in the right direction of making a better life for every child and foster youth in the welfare system. CDSS, the California Welfare Director's Association and the Foundation Consortium for California's Children and Youth have worked in partnership to improve the child welfare system over the last three years, resulting in many changes and reform efforts.

Immediate next steps noted in the report are focused on maintaining the current momentum for reform, including continued support for the 11 pilot counties that are implementing and testing key reforms prior to statewide expansion, continued evolution of the state's new Outcomes and Accountability System to drive policy and practice changes that improve outcomes, and strengthening of a state interagency team that maximizes coordination and resources for children and their families.

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