



# Who is Caring for California Children in Foster Care?

In this issue, *insights* will present:

Where Our Children are Being Placed

Data on California's Caregivers Programs and Policies

The Promise of Reform

Moving Forward

“ California recognizes the necessity for major reforms in how we care for vulnerable children and families, especially those living in deep poverty. We need more robust data across all systems to guide the efforts of policymakers, and to inform all who are involved in making critical decisions for change.

State Senator Holly J. Mitchell

“ Unless we change the way we interact with foster families and relative caregivers and see them as partners, we will never have enough homes to care for children in foster care, and therefore we will likely never be successful at re-engineering our child welfare system.

**Greg Rose** Deputy Director,  
Children and Family Services Division

There is an emerging consensus in the public and private sectors that we have a unique opportunity to reimagine and rebuild the way California cares for its children and youth in foster care. This renewed effort has been inspired by successes in reducing the number of children in care over the past decade, informed through new learnings from Title IV-E waiver participation, and fueled by an unwillingness to accept the poor outcomes of group homes.

This issue of *insights* offers a primer on what we know (and don't know) about the people who are caring for children when they are removed from their families, and what initiatives and programs are working to improve the recruitment, training, and retention of those caregivers. The assumption is that the more we know about foster parents—their demographic details, what motivated them to become foster parents, their expectations and needs—the better we will be able to recruit, support, and retain quality foster families.

## Where do our children go when they are separated from their birth families?

“ It’s always great to have more information to try to make the best placement decisions, but it doesn’t currently work that way. The reality of day-to-day work is that if there is a relative placement available, we go there first and try to get them approved. If not, we’re going to take the best placement available. The biggest issue for counties is that we don’t have the kind of resources built into our system to support families (birth and foster) in caring for kids over the long term.

**Sylvia Deporto** Deputy Director, San Francisco Family and Children Services

Removing a child from his or her birth family is traumatic for everyone involved. Although the goal is for children to remain with their family with the right supports, sometimes safety or other concerns require removal.

Usually referred to as “placements” by social workers and others working with children in out-of-home care, a variety of living arrangements are considered when a child is removed from his or her birth home. The intent is to provide a placement that offers stability and physical and emotional supports that address the child’s unique needs, and a caregiver who partners with child welfare in working toward a forever family for each child. Unfortunately, because the imperative is to place a child quickly and assess his or her needs post initial placement, placements don’t always meet these goals and sometimes a child may exit the system from a different placement type.

The following is an overview of the primary types of out-of-home care,<sup>1</sup> including the percentage by placement type of California’s nearly 63,000 foster children ages 0-20 in child welfare, and almost 4,000 additional youth in probation supervised care.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> January 2015 CCWIP point-in-time data: [http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb\\_childwelfare/PIT.aspx](http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare/PIT.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> January 2015 CCWIP point-in-time data, ages 0-20, child welfare and probation supervised placements

**Relative Care (33%)<sup>3</sup>** Relative or kinship care, is any living arrangement in which a child is cared for by a relative, e.g., aunts, uncles, or grandparents. It is a federal and California state mandate to place a child with a relative if an approved home is available. The mandate is based on the assumption that children in relative care are often better connected with other family members, will feel a greater sense of belonging, and are more likely to experience a culturally appropriate upbringing. Children in relative care fall into two categories:

- **Federally eligible children.** Eligibility for [Title IV-E funding](#) is determined by Aid to Families with Dependent Children criteria for poverty set to 1996 standards. Payments and services are equal to other foster families.
- **Non-federally eligible children.** Financial and other resource support is significantly lower than non-relative care placements.<sup>4</sup>

**Foster Families (32%)** A short-term intervention for abused, neglected, and/or dependent children. Foster care provides a temporary place to live when parents or another relative cannot take care of a child. In California, foster care placements are made by children’s services

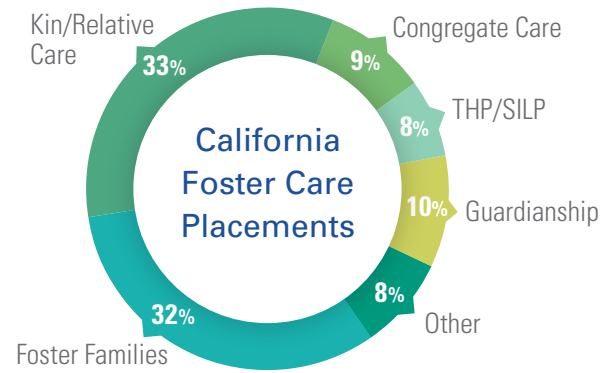
<sup>3</sup> Does not include: 1) Non- relative/extended family member placements which can only be assigned by counties, and the numbers are not reported, or 2) Informal or private relative care placements where the child is placed with relatives without the involvement of a state agency like CPS.

<sup>4</sup> The Assistance to Relative Caregivers program is working to minimize the gap in payments and services to non-federally eligible relative care homes.

agencies (including child welfare and probation) to either of the following placement types:

- **Licensed Foster Homes (26%)** A foster home may be licensed by either a county agency or by Community Care Licensing (CCL), the state agency that licenses and oversees both day care and residential facilities for children and adults in California.
  - » 39 counties license their own foster homes.
  - » 19 counties choose to have foster care homes licensed by the state through CCL.
- **Foster Family Agencies (74%)** FFAs are licensed private agencies that aid the county in the placement of children.
  - » All FFAs are licensed by the state, through CCL, to certify foster families.
  - » FFAs often perform additional community outreach to identify and recruit new foster families, support their foster families with coaching and structured peer-to-peer support groups, and help families understand and navigate the child welfare process.

**Guardianship (10%)** In this placement, the caregiver has legally received parental authority over a child placed in out-of-home care. Relative caregivers often become legal guardians which allows the child to exit the child welfare system without terminating the parents’ rights to the child.

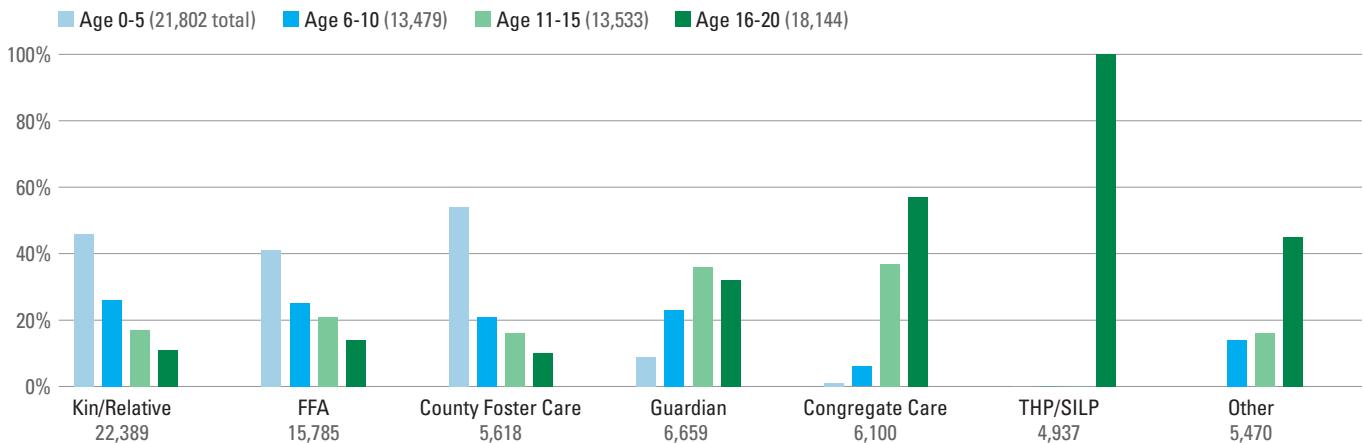


**Congregate Care (9%)** The term ‘congregate care’ refers to a variety of facilities—including group homes—in which children and youth reside away from their families in a non-family setting, with 24-hour care but without hospital-level medical attention. Youth in group homes are primarily being cared for by staff who are shift-care workers with varying levels of experience and training. 90 percent of youth in group homes are 11 or older.

**THP/SILP Transitional Housing and Supervised Independent Living Placements (8%)** These are types of placements in which non-minor dependents are allowed to live alone or with roommates in apartments, dorm rooms, or in single-family dwellings with less intensive supervision from a care manager than a caregiver or foster parent would provide.

**Other (8%)** Pre-adopt, court-specified homes, non-foster-care, trial home visit, runaways, and unspecified.

### 67,000 California Children in Care - Age Profile by Placement Type



## Data on California's caregivers

The California Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), run by the California Department of Social Services, provides child welfare workers with immediate access to child, family, and case-specific information in order to make appropriate and timely case decisions. It includes data on children in care, services delivered, and placement information.<sup>5</sup> The California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP), a collaboration between the University of California at Berkeley and CDSS, uses the data available from the CWS/CMS to provide policymakers, child welfare workers, and researchers, with customizable information on California's entire child welfare system.

Additionally, each county has its own database on available placements, facilitating child welfare agencies in recruiting, training, and licensing foster family homes. The placement process includes a criminal background check, a home inspection, and an assessment of financial self-sufficiency. This information is reported to the state's Community Care Licensing agency. Foster families are also recruited and managed through private FFAs that generally collect more information than county child welfare agencies, and also report the data that is

**“ Demographic information on foster parents in California is definitely needed to compare with trends available at the national level. These data, along with indicators of skills and other key attributes of foster parents, will enable us to more effectively develop, support, and retain successful foster families.**

**Daniel Webster** Principal Investigator,  
California Child Welfare Indicators Project

required by CCL. CCL's data reporting requirements are limited, and the information they capture represents the only publicly available data.

### National data on foster parents

There is some demographic information on caregivers based on census data, which compares foster parents with the general population.<sup>6</sup> Compared to the average American parent, foster parents tend to be older, possess fewer financial and educational resources, and live in homes with more children. More specifically, foster parents are:

- Typically over age 40.
- Most often married, although single foster parenting is on the rise.
- Less likely to be college educated.
- Working outside the home (approximately 50%).
- Unable to regularly pay their rent/mortgage (approximately 25%).
- Reporting to have experienced food insecurity (approximately 25%).

Ethnicity is one area where there is both national and state data, and the breakouts differ significantly. Nationally, approximately 40% of foster families are Black, 42% White, 11% Latino, and 7% Other. However, according to the 2014 California Annual Progress and Services Report, 21% of foster families in the state are Black, 25% White, 50% Latino, and 4% are Other.

It is important to note that demographic data—for example, income, age and education—do not tell the story of *why* an individual or family decides to open their home to a child in foster care, nor does it indicate the quality of care they are able to provide.

<sup>6</sup> Barth, et al (2008). Characteristics of out-of-home caregiving environments provided under child welfare services. *Child Welfare*, 87(3), pp 5-39.

O'Hare, W.P. (2008). Data on children in foster care from the Census Bureau. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.childsworld.ca.gov/PG1328.htm>

### Data Linking in Action

Some county welfare agencies and FFAs have worked to link their local data for particular placement needs. For example, the Sacramento County Office of Education is working to minimize school instability for students in foster care by mining and linking available data to help identify best-match foster homes within a child's current school district. The tool they use, called [School Connect](#), is an important resource for social workers and school personnel.

“With the magnitude of change that is possible through CCR, we must do more to partner with the families, especially relatives, who want to give our foster children a home, ease their trauma, and help ensure each child makes their way back home or to a ‘forever family’. Over 50 percent of our children in care are placed with relatives, and our Board of Supervisors is advocating for a much more comprehensive program for foster parents and relative caregivers in the future.

**Philip Browning** Director, L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services

## Programs and policies that support caregivers

The following programs and policies represent opportunities to improve the way we recruit and support caregivers in foster care.

The most broad-sweeping effort is Continuum of Care Reform, recently launched by CDSS via Senate Bill 1013. Building upon previous programs and policies (see pages 7 – 9), CCR aspires to re-engineer the way we care for the children in California's child welfare system.

### Continuum of Care Reform (Full implementation planned for 2017)

**What it is:** The vision of CCR is for all children to live with a committed, permanent, and nurturing family, realized by services and supports that are tailored to meet the needs of the individual child and family, with the ultimate goal of maintaining the family. When it isn't possible to keep the family together, CCR helps with transitioning the child or youth to a permanent family and/or preparing the child for a successful transition into adulthood. Under CCR, group homes are used when needed as short-term, specialized, and intensive treatment interventions.

The statewide CCR effort was informed by the [Residentially Based Services](#) Demonstration Project,<sup>7</sup> implemented in 2010 in response to a number of growing concerns about group home placements. The RBS framework sought to bring services back into households and away from group homes. The pilot project was initially implemented in four counties (Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Francisco, and Los Angeles) with 10 group home providers. The RBS project still currently operates in three counties (Sacramento, San Francisco and Los Angeles) and has been extended through July 1, 2016. San Bernardino County has opted to fully implement its RBS model outside of the pilot.

**Who it serves:** Children and families in the continuum of foster care with a primary focus on group home and FFA programs.

<sup>7</sup> Established by California Assembly Bill 1453 (Soto, Chapter 466, Statutes of 2007).

**What we have learned:** Beginning to implement CCR's interdependent recommendations in 2017 will require a sustained and coordinated effort over several years. However, recent statutory and budget changes are already paving the way for system changes: time limits on group home placements, new funding for Approved Relative Caregivers of non-federally eligible children, and increased age requirements for group home staff are all steps toward implementing the CCR framework.

“ As we work to reform the system, we must ensure that we build the new component before we dismantle the broken part. We cannot take away the old bridge until we have a new functioning one.

**Jill Jacobs** Executive Director,  
Family Builders

“ An older population of youth in congregate care may require foster families that have specialized training and support to produce successful outcomes.

**Jim Roberts** CEO of Family Care  
Network, Inc.

Within recent years, several state-developed programs have improved supports for caregivers, and started laying the foundation for more comprehensive change in the way California cares for children in care. Although not mandatory, several counties are implementing the programs and beginning to see early impacts (see the map on page 7 for implementing counties).

## Approved Relative Caregiver (Implemented, 2015)

**What it is:** The Approved Relative Caregiver program is a CDSS program that provides adult relative caregivers<sup>8</sup> of federally ineligible children the basic rate paid for other children who are federally eligible. ARC is a response to the disconnect between a policy preference for relative caregivers and the funding available to support such placements. Prior to ARC, approved relative caregivers not eligible to receive federal rates, received the substantially lower TANF (CalWORKs) rate of support.

**Who it serves:** Approved relative caregivers of children not eligible to receive federal foster care support payments. It is not a mandatory program so California counties need to opt in to participate.

**What we hope to learn:** Although only recently implemented, early feedback indicates the program will:

- Provide the opportunity for counties to step children down from higher-level placements, for example, group homes, into relative caregiver homes where some evidence shows outcomes are better.
- Support local efforts to improve outcomes for children, including reducing placement disruptions, increasing placement stability, and leading to children in lower levels of care.
- Address child and family poverty for relatives caring for children, and thus help to mitigate the adverse impacts of being raised in poverty.

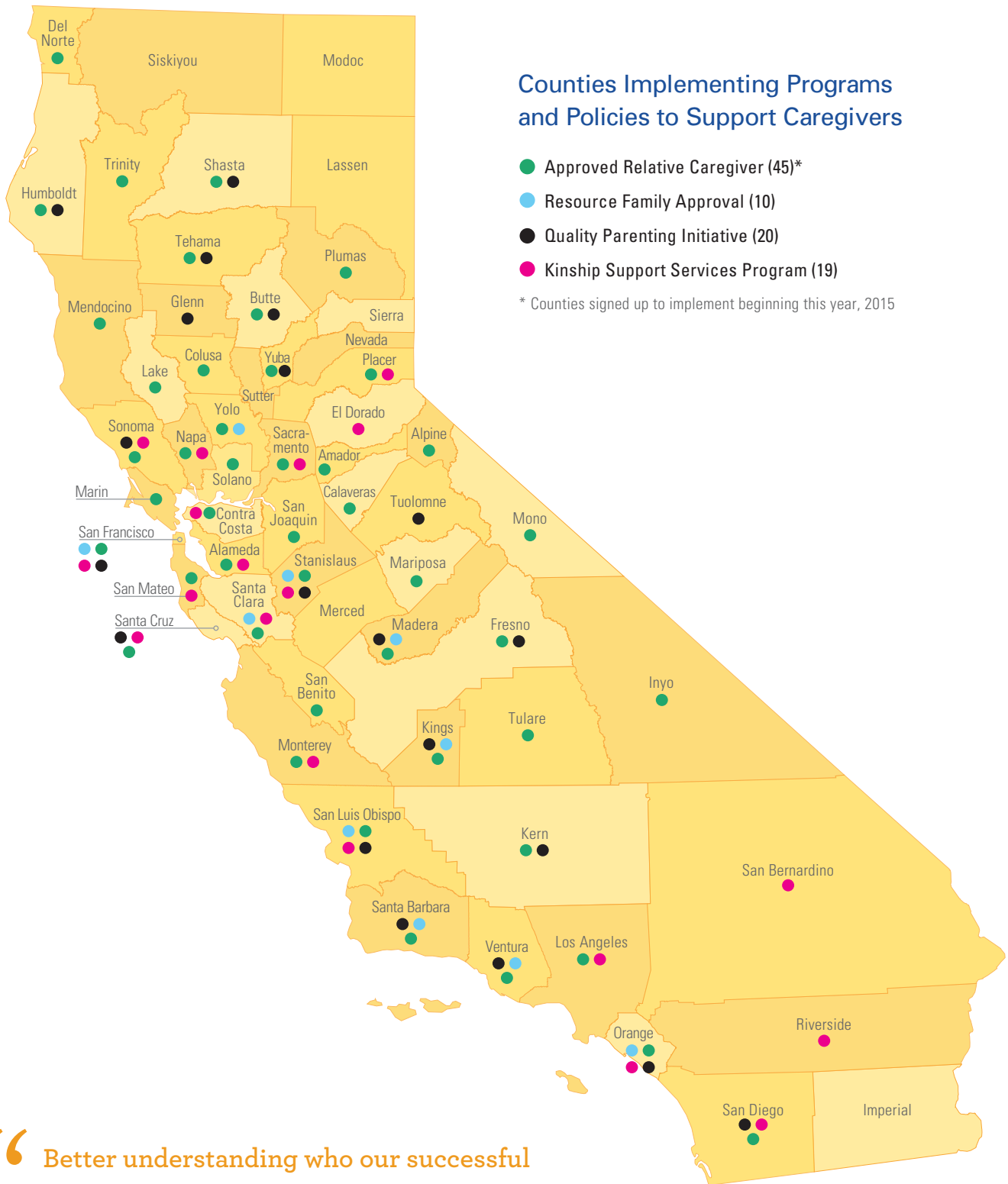
## Resource Family Approval Program (Implemented, 2013)

**What it is:** The [Resource Family Approval \(RFA\) program](#) is a unified, family friendly, and child-centered family approval process to replace the existing multiple processes for licensing foster family homes and approving relatives and nonrelative extended family members as foster care providers, and approving families for legal guardianship or adoption. A Resource Family that is considered eligible to provide foster care for related and unrelated children in out-of-home placement, will also be considered and approved

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<sup>8</sup> An adult related to the child by blood, adoption, or marriage within the fifth degree of kinship.





“ Better understanding who our successful caregivers are, and the supports they need to parent, is a really important topic right now because it underlies all of the reform efforts that are currently underway.

Jennifer Rodriguez Executive Director, Youth Law Center

for adoption or guardianship, and does not have to undergo any additional approval or licensure. The approval process is concurrent, ultimately reducing the wait time for permanency.

**Who it serves:** Foster care providers (relative and non-relative) and other caregivers. Those who complete the licensing to become foster care providers through the RFA program will have the option to become adoptive parents or guardians without an additional approval process.

**What we have learned:** The five early implementing counties<sup>9</sup> report that relatives and non-related extended family members in particular feel better prepared to meet the child's needs and feel more valued as caregivers. This is due in large part to the effort put in to engaging relatives in foster parent training up front with other foster parents. Early data indicate that children placed with RFA homes are experiencing fewer placement changes. Up-front assessment of caregivers provides caseworkers with valuable information about these caregivers and their needs, while preparing caregivers for their role in supporting all forms of permanency, including reunification.

“ RFA is a positive reform because it means that we are thinking about permanency from the first day the child walks into care. We are saying that a foster home should meet requirements that are closer to an adoptive home. That is a good thing for children.

**Jill Duerr Berrick** Zellerbach Family Professor,  
Berkeley School of Social Welfare

## Quality Parenting Initiative (Implemented, 2009)

**What it is:** Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is an approach to strengthening foster care by refocusing on excellent parenting for all children in the child welfare system. A collaborative effort of CDSS, the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA), and the Youth Law Center, the purpose of the initiative is to develop a statewide approach to recruiting and retaining high-quality caregivers. The theory of change is that creating culture, practice, and policy that supports and reinforces good parenting from caregivers is a necessary foundation of any effort to recruit and retain quality families.

Implementing the QPI requires child welfare agencies to reorient policy and practice supporting foster families and relatives in providing the loving, committed, and skilled care that the child needs, working with caregivers as equal, respected partners to meet the child's needs. The QPI accomplishes this by bringing county child welfare agency leadership and staff together with foster families, relative caregivers, birth families, youth, court staff, FFAs, and other stakeholders to jointly define and articulate the [expectations of both caregivers and the child welfare agency](#) to provide high quality foster care.

“ Until we started thinking about QPI as both recruitment and retention of foster parents it just didn't make sense to us and we couldn't get traction. Once we made that shift, and brought all of the right parties to the table, we started seeing some changes with families, and we hope eventually, for children.

**Tracey Schiro** Assistant Director of Social Services,  
San Luis Obispo

<sup>9</sup> RFA early implementing counties include: Kings, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara and San Francisco



**Who it serves:** QPI serves caregivers, children, and the child welfare agency by creating culture, practice, and policy that supports and reinforces excellent parenting from caregivers. This is a necessary foundation and prerequisite to any effort to retain and recruit high quality families.

**What we have learned:** According to the [Youth Law Center](#), the major successes of the project have been in systems change and improved relationships. All QPI sites are working on multiple local and statewide system changes needed in order to support high quality parenting. Sites have also reported measurable improvement in outcomes such as:

- Reduced unplanned placement changes.
- Reduced use of group care.
- Reduced numbers of sibling separation.
- More success with reunification.

## Kinship Support Services Program (Implemented, 1997)

**What it is:** Kinship Support Services Program focuses on relative caregivers and their children. KSSP also provides post-permanency services to relative caregivers who have become the legal guardian or adoptive parent of a formerly dependent child. The goal of KSSP is to further strengthen a family's ability to maintain a supportive and stable environment for a child in their care. Services provided include case management, health management, family and youth recreation activities, support groups, educational seminars, tutoring, counseling services, family conferencing, respite care, guardianship clinics, referrals, and family advocacy.

**Who it serves:** Relative caregivers and the children in their care.

The following federal programs have been implemented across California to further support caregivers who become forever families through guardianship and adoption.

## Kin-GAP / Fed-GAP (Implemented, 2000)

**What it is:** The Kin-GAP program offers a state subsidy to relative legal guardians of children who have left the juvenile court dependency system. The subsidy is 100 percent of the basic foster care rate. Kin-GAP is meant to provide more options for the guardian, the social services agency, and the courts in order to develop the most appropriate permanency plan for dependent children. Fed-GAP is the federally funded Kin-GAP program.

**Who it serves:** Relative caregivers of children leaving the juvenile court dependency system up to the age of 18, unless special circumstances apply.

## Adoption Assistance Program (Implemented, 1980)

**What it is:** The Adoption Assistance Program was created by the California state legislature after Congress created federal subsidies to encourage the adoption of special needs children in 1980. AAP is intended to benefit children in foster care by removing the financial disincentives of adoption to provide the security and stability of a permanent home. Children may receive a federal funding subsidy under Title IV-E or a state-funding subsidy per state guidelines. The benefits available for AAP eligible children are as follows: a monthly financial benefit, medical insurance through Medi-Cal, non-recurring adoption expenses (up to \$400 per child), payment for residential treatment and continuation of AAP benefits in a re-adoption.

**Who it Serves:** The program benefits AAP-eligible children with subsidies without which adoptive placement would be unlikely. An adopted child may receive AAP benefits until the age of 18, unless special circumstances apply. A reassessment of the child's needs and family's circumstances is conducted every two years.

## The promise of reform - improving recruitment and support of caregivers

“ In the current system, social workers are making placement decisions under less than ideal circumstances: very short timeframes, high caseloads and—the biggest barrier—a serious shortage of good family-based placement options. That’s why we as a state need to invest in services and supports to recruit, support, and retain foster parents and relative caregivers.

**Frank Mecca** Executive Director, County Welfare Directors Association

Continuum of Care Reform is moving the system in the right direction with a goal of assessing children’s needs before making a placement—more of a long-term focus versus a short-term placement goal. But questions remain: How do we know we are placing a child in a home that exhibits the characteristics of quality care? What supports do caregivers need in order to provide quality care? What are the standards of quality care, and who is ensuring that adherence to these standards is being tracked and reported?

Research on the characteristics of high-quality foster parents conducted by the University of California at Berkeley with 46 foster parents and 33 social workers across six California counties in 2011 found six unifying themes.<sup>10</sup> High-quality caregivers were: *flexible, teachable, members of a team, loving, interested in strengthening a family, and up for a challenge.*

The behaviors foster parents most frequently exhibited that might demonstrate high-quality care included: a) loving and nurturing the healthy development of the child; b) accepting the child as a full member of the family; c) advocating for the needs of the child; d) strengthening the child’s connection to his or her birth family; e) valuing the role of each team member; and f) knowing when to ask for help.

These findings are very similar to the qualities of a successful foster parent that have been identified by the Quality Parenting Initiative. A quality caregiver:

- Is a full partner in a team supporting the healthy development and permanency goal for a child who cannot live with his or her birth family.
- Assumes many of the roles of a child’s parents and provides for a child’s needs while he or she is in their home.
- Provides the foster child: food, shelter, medical care, education, safety, support, encouragement, reassurance, emotional support, security, structure, and love, all consistent with the needs of the child.
- Mentors the birth parent(s) when appropriate.
- Maintains a lifelong commitment to the child wherever he or she lives.

Understanding the foster-parent characteristics and behaviors that yield positive outcomes for children is an important first step in determining how to retool recruitment and develop standardized tools to assess families for their capacity to provide quality care, not only a safe place to live. Additionally, understanding how demographic factors impact a foster family’s ability to perform its role is important in structuring the right supports to enable foster parents to be successful.

<sup>10</sup> Recruiting for Excellence in Foster Care: Marrying Child Welfare Research with Brand Marketing Strategies,” Jill Duerr Berrick, Carole Shauffer, Jennifer Rodriguez, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 2011.

## Moving Forward

Although it will take several years to implement Continuum of Care Reform and realize its impact, the reform effort sets the stage for significant change in where and how we place our children in care, and how we recruit and support foster families for greater success for our children.

As CCR nears implementation, there are also some data on how youth in care regard their placements. The [CalYOUTH Baseline Youth Survey](#), a first-of-its kind study that interviewed 727 17-year-old California foster youth, found that 66 percent reported wanting to stay in foster care after age 18, and 70 percent agreed that their foster parents had been helpful to them. Involving youth in decision-making may provide an opportunity to better understand the behaviors and characteristics of foster parents who are “doing their jobs well” according to those who matter most—the children in their care.

There is not a single fix for improving our caregiver system. The change will come from committed implementation of a complex mix of: 1) programs and policies such as QPI, CCR, and RFA, 2) the recent investments in supports such as ARC and foster parent and relative recruitment, 3) caregiver retention and support, bolstered by the 2015 budget bill,<sup>11</sup> and 4) a system-wide paradigm shift to trauma-focused care and true engagement strategies with birth families, relatives, foster caregivers, social workers, and others including mental health providers.

Change will still take time, but we are at an historic moment where policies and programs are being implemented that could significantly improve the experience of being a foster family, and ultimately the outcomes for children in care.

“ In 2014, L.A. County received several thousand inquiries from individuals interested in learning more about being a foster parent. Only a small percentage resulted in licensed foster care homes, and many of the inquiries were never even addressed. If we had the capacity to follow-up on the inquiries in a meaningful way, and the understanding of what characteristics to look for that signal a good foster family, maybe we could increase the number of high quality foster parents.

**Andrew Bridge** CEO, Southern California Foster Family & Adoption Agency

“ We have been foster parents to seven children (ages 10 months to 17 years) and it’s always heartbreaking to us when children have to be removed from their homes. Equally amazing to us is how resilient the children are. We are very happy to have adopted our two girls, and if we had to go through it again—supporting all of the children no matter their path—we would in a heartbeat.

**Tina and Bob** Alameda County foster-adopt parents

<sup>11</sup> The final 2015-16 budget provides \$15 million in the general fund, in addition to \$2.8 million from the May Revision, for foster parent and relative recruitment and support, along with budget bill language.

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For this issue of *insights*, we would like to thank Bryn King, Daniel Webster, and Emily Putnam-Hornstein of the California Child Welfare Indicators Project, for their help with the data, as well as the many people who provided information and perspectives in addition to those quoted, including: Vernon Brown, Aspiranet; Roberto Favela, EMQ Families First; Jennie Feria, L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services; Karen Gunderson, California Department of Social Services; Bryan Samuels, Chapin Hall; Carole Shauffer, Youth Law Center; Carroll Schroeder, California Alliance of Child and Family Services; Angie Schwartz, Alliance for Children's Rights; and Cathy White, Sacramento County Office of Education.

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### **The California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership**

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is a collaboration of private and public organizations working to improve outcomes in the child welfare system. The Partnership comprises five philanthropic organizations (Casey Family Programs, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Stuart Foundation, Walter S. Johnson Foundation, and Zellerbach Family Foundation) and the California Department of Social Services, the Judicial Council of California, and the County Welfare Directors Association.

*insights* is an ongoing publication of the Partnership that examines the links between data, policy, and outcomes for our state's most vulnerable children and families. Download previous editions of *insights* and find out more about the Partnership at [co-invest.org](http://co-invest.org).



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Designed by José Fernandez.