



Child Welfare Services

Stakeholders Group

CWS Redesign: The Future of California's Child Welfare Services

Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Build on the Best – Reinvent the Rest”

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When too many of California’s children are without the security of a stable, permanent home; when too many families return time and again to the system with escalating problems before services can be provided; when too many youth are leaving the system without being prepared for adult life—it is time to do something about it. Nationally, there has been no fundamental change in the child welfare system in 20 years. The one-size-fits-all approach of the past cannot meet the changing, complex needs of children and families. This holds unintended consequences for their well-being and costly impacts for society. California is no longer willing to accept this reality and is taking action to transform its child welfare system into one that benefits all children and families with accountability for results.

The plan is in place, the partners are poised and the vision is clear. California is taking action to change how child welfare services are delivered in California, so that:

Every child in California lives in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities.

The Child Welfare Services (CWS) Redesign (“Redesign”) is the long-term strategic plan that sets in motion a series of actions across the state to bring the new vision of child welfare services to every county. Comprehensive in scope, the plan contains an integrated set of policy shifts; practice improvements; alignment of partners, systems and communities; and new accountability structures to make certain the promise of a safe and stable home is realized for all children.

Redesign represents an unprecedented effort to proactively examine what works and what needs improvement about California’s child welfare services system. Too often across the nation, the momentum for public policy change in child welfare stems from tragedy or other negative motivators. Instead, California’s Redesign builds upon the best of child welfare services in the state and reinvents the rest. Fortified by a strong commitment to achieve better outcomes for children and families who are vulnerable to the risks of abuse and neglect, California has charted the course for reaching that goal.

The Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group

The Davis Administration and California Legislature established the Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group in 2000. Convened by the California Department of Social

Services (CDSS) the CWS Stakeholders Group was charged with the task to (1) examine the current reality of child welfare services in California, (2) build on effective child welfare practices inside the state and elsewhere and (3) recommend comprehensive, integrated system changes to improve outcomes for children and families.

A diverse group of 60 individuals representing all aspects of the public and private child welfare community, the Stakeholders Group has been a catalyst for unprecedented interest and support across multiple sectors. From academic researchers to front line caseworkers; from former foster youth to philanthropists; from union representatives to legislative analysts; from juvenile court judges to kinship caregivers—the Stakeholders worked together diligently to complete their task.

The process has been thorough, cumulative and inclusive over the three years allocated to conduct this complex work. Scores of committed individuals from all levels of the child welfare system have participated with the Stakeholders to examine the current reality, recommend system changes and plan for implementation.

Setting the Stage for Strategic Change

In undertaking their work, the Stakeholders acknowledged the many committed individuals in the legislative and policy arenas who have made important strides to address child welfare issues in recent years. From policies that better meet the developmental and emotional needs of foster children to assisting relatives in becoming guardians through financial and support services to improving the capacity of the child welfare workforce to serve children and families, these efforts have been significant and were often driven by the foster youth representatives, who were members of the Stakeholders Group, who could speak from their own experience. However, all too often, these efforts have been isolated and therefore limited in their overall impact.

In addition, the Davis Administration and the State Legislature have recognized and acted upon the fact that the Child Welfare Services program has been historically under-funded. Together they increased total funding for CWS by \$511.5 million, which cumulatively represents a 32 percent increase over the previous five years. Despite this investment, an independent study demonstrated that most social workers' caseloads are still too high for them to meet all of the requirements of the job. Because singular initiatives and funding alone are not enough, the Administration formed the Stakeholders Group to provide a united, systemic, statewide effort to transform the entire program into achieving more efficient, effective results and to identify resources needed to be successful.

The Redesign effort has formulated a comprehensive, strategic plan to improve child welfare outcomes on the shoulders of these meaningful, yet limited efforts of the past. It is through the integrated, systemic approach of the Redesign that the

full measure of change, support and collaboration needed for deep, lasting impact can be realized.

Key Challenges in Child Welfare

California is at a critical juncture to demonstrate improvements in providing Child Welfare Services. The state has about 13 percent of the nation's total child population, yet California's foster care caseload represents about 20 percent of the nation's total foster care population. For years, consistently high numbers of child abuse reports have been challenging the capacity of the system to respond effectively. The social, emotional and developmental cost to the children at risk of harm is profound. Many cases involve children under five years of age, with African-American children substantially over-represented. Many of the children who are in the child welfare system have parents who are burdened with substance abuse, domestic violence or mental health problems, creating an environment of chronic neglect for their children. California is not alone—nearly every state is facing similar trends—and is joining states such as Illinois and New York to restructure the Child Welfare Services Program.

There are important lessons from the innovations that California's child welfare agencies, service providers and researchers have already produced. Many counties have developed and implemented models of practice that have resulted in successful outcomes for children and families, such as Family-to-Family, wraparound, service integration with CalWORKs, family resource centers and public health nurse visitation. The Redesign builds on the elements of these successful programs and takes to scale what we know works to maximize positive results. With closer scrutiny regarding which interventions work best, the knowledge base will grow from blending the lessons learned by practitioners and researchers alike. While initial investments are necessary to make these system improvements, the cost-savings that arise from improved client outcomes, coordinating efforts among partners to reach common goals and staying accountable for results represent an invaluable return on social capital.

Strategic Reform for Lasting Improvements

The substance and capacity of the entire system will be built around what we know works for children and families. The Redesign is not a series of quick fixes nor is it simply more funding added to the current system. Instead it is a staged, comprehensive, phased approach to improve child welfare outcomes in California. It blends effective practices grounded in principles of fairness and equity with system reforms to ensure sufficient resources, stronger partnerships, workforce excellence and greater accountability to sustain results over time.

Results for Children and Families

The ultimate success of the Redesign rests in real and lasting results for California's children and families. In essence, it means the following results can be expected to take shape over time:



- **Children are Safer:** Fewer and less severe reports of child maltreatment are made to CWS hotlines and any incidence of foster children being maltreated will continue to be intolerable.
- **Families are Stronger:** More families are able to safely and consistently care for their children as a result of their involvement with CWS and its service partners. Parents are treated with dignity and empowered to help resolve their own challenges and plan their own futures.
- **Youth are Supported:** Youth in foster care receive the financial and emotional support they need to become successful adults.
- **Services are More Responsive:** Children and families at risk receive the services they need when they need them without the threat of removal.
- **Results are More Fair & Equitable:** All families facing similar challenges experience equally positive benefits as a result of their encounters with CWS and its partners.
- **Children Experience Greater Stability:** Children who cannot be cared for safely and consistently by their parents gain permanent families through adoption or guardianship in greater numbers and more quickly.
- **Communities Share Responsibility for Child Welfare:** Communities are more involved in protecting children and strengthening families.
- **Children and Families are Served by an Excellent Workforce:** All levels of the workforce that carry out functions of child welfare, including CWS and its public and private partners, have the capacity, training and support to be effective in helping children and families reach positive outcomes..

Such outcomes across all communities in California will become the true measure of the Redesign's success. Redesign implementation through commitment at the state, county and community levels will set in motion what it takes to improve safety, permanence and well-being for children and families.

Overview of Redesign Objectives

Building on the work of Year 2, the Stakeholders view the greatest impact on improving outcomes for children and families is by changing how CWS and its partners respond to children and families from the first hotline call throughout the life

of the case. Changing the intake system to be more responsive, having a stronger emphasis on restoring and rebuilding permanent families for children and ensuring that youth who age out of foster care are better equipped for adulthood are the key leverage points where practice changes can profoundly affect results. These objectives are described below in terms of what they seek to accomplish and what it will take to implement these shifts in practice.

*Partner to **PREVENT** child abuse and neglect*

The CWS Stakeholders have concluded that prevention of child abuse and support of families is not only good practice, but also a cost effective strategy to protect and nurture children and maximize the quality of life for California's residents. The practice of prevention is woven into all aspects of the Redesign to build a proactive system that seeks to mitigate the circumstances leading to child maltreatment before it occurs. Establishing a statewide prevention system will require that we:

- Establish **partnerships** at the state, county and neighborhood levels to share knowledge, responsibility, resources and accountability with CWS for the protection and well-being of children and families within the community.
- Develop a comprehensive **network of resources and opportunities** in each community to ensure families receive services they need when they need them.
- Employ dedicated, sustained **flexible funding strategies** to support a comprehensive range of prevention strategies.

*Act early to **PRESERVE** and strengthen families*

The CWS Stakeholders Group has focused on how to build a system of early intervention in California communities to engage families by strengthening and preserving their capacity to protect and nurture their children. It requires alignment of CWS and community partners to act early—as soon as the family comes to the attention of CWS—and offer flexible response options so that families can get what they need when they need it. While the overriding goal remains child safety, implementing a new CWS intake and response process involves the following actions:

- Establish a **new intake structure** to provide three pathways of service response based on the family's level of safety and risk.
- Improve methods for **contracting with public and private agencies** to focus on shared responsibility for achieving child & family outcomes.
- Apply a **standardized approach to assessment** of safety, risk and protective capacity of families.

Current funding and policies only allow CWS to intervene in the most serious cases.

- Enhance the CWS Hotline/Intake Response to promote **more relationship-based contact with families**.
- Engage in a **comprehensive assessment** process to examine all factors that need to change in order to keep the child safe.
- Use **team decision-making** for assessment and case planning.
- **Shift the focus from substantiating abuse and neglect to engaging families** and identify what they need as the basis for determining the best course of action to reduce risk and strengthen family functioning.
- Establish availability and access to a **continuum of core services** that address the needs of vulnerable children and families.

*Broaden efforts to **RESTORE** family capacity.*

Federal law requires that reasonable efforts be made to restore the capacity of birth parents to resume their parental responsibilities. Given all of the Redesign's efforts, some situations will still require removal of children from their birth parents on either a temporary or permanent basis. When this occurs, the Stakeholders envision a better way for CWS to recognize the importance of building parental capacity and strengthening natural, meaningful connections between children and their birth family systems. Implementation of this new emphasis on restoration involves the following actions:

- Conduct **inclusive and comprehensive case planning** that engages families in individualized services and supports to build on their existing strengths while addressing issues of concern based on thorough, periodic assessments of child safety.
- Emphasize **early, safe restoration of families** to quickly and sufficiently address safety concerns and promote family functioning to avoid or shorten placement whenever possible.
- Promote **competent legal advocacy** to improve cooperation and alignment between CWS and court personnel resulting in better outcomes for children and families in child welfare related court proceedings.
- Utilize **non-adversarial approaches** to resolve case issues that might otherwise require court intervention.

*Strengthen alternatives to **REBUILD** permanent families for children.*

The CWS Stakeholders envision a redesigned system where children who cannot be cared for by their parents gain permanent families through adoption, guardianship, or other permanency options in greater numbers and more quickly. The preferred result for children who encounter CWS is to remain or return home safely and permanently. Unfortunately, for many children and families, circumstances preclude this possibility.

The CWS Stakeholders call for a renewed commitment to permanence for every child entering out-of-home care through implementation of the following actions:

- Conduct **inclusive, flexible and comprehensive case planning** that engages all parties in planning simultaneously for both family restoration and permanency alternatives to ensure children gain the security of a permanent family quickly and effectively.
- Promote enduring family attachments for all children and youth by emphasizing **birth family connections as a priority** whenever children cannot be cared for by their own parents.
- Embrace the view that “**forever families**” **can be found** for virtually any child or youth who has failed to achieve permanency. This means no youth leaves the system without a stable and enduring relationship with a committed, willing and capable adult.

*Systematically **PREPARE** youth for success in adulthood*

The Redesign seeks to reduce the number of youth who remain in foster care until age 18, and recognizes the urgent need to assist older youth with the skills required for successful transition to adulthood. A renewed focus on preparation for adulthood illustrates how the intervention efforts of CWS are brought back full circle to prevention. Youth who exit the system positioned for success in their own lives will be much less likely to repeat the pattern of maltreatment with their own children. The following actions will ensure that older youth who remain in foster care will be actively engaged in activities and experiences through which they practice increasing independence, develop needed skills and create a viable plan for their lives after foster care:

- Conduct **inclusive, flexible and comprehensive case planning** that engages youth in planning to achieve permanency while simultaneously preparing for transition to adulthood.
- Expand the focus on **strong and enduring ties** for every youth to one or more nurturing adults.
- Develop and utilize a **community network of services and supports** to enhance youth preparation while in care and continue to assist youth through their transition into adulthood.
- Provide every youth who leaves the system at age 18 with a “**guaranteed preparation package**” that includes:
 - A healthy sense of cultural and personal identity
 - A close, positive and lasting relationship with at least one adult

Each year in California, nearly 2,300 youth “age out” of foster care without safe, affordable housing in which to live.

- Other supportive relationships and community connections
- Access to physical and mental health services
- High school diploma, equivalency certificate, or GED
- Income sufficient to meet basic needs
- A safe and stable living situation
- Basic documents needed for employment, such as social security number, birth certificate, immigration papers

AFFECT CHANGE through Workforce Excellence

The Stakeholders assert that because helping relationships are clearly the primary mechanism of change for clients in child welfare, it is these individuals—the child welfare workforce—who need to be valued, recognized, supported and invested in. The Stakeholders have defined workforce broadly to include both personnel of county child welfare agencies and the California Department of Social Services as well as collaborative partners essential to child welfare operations, such as community based agencies, law enforcement, resource families (kinship and foster parents), court personnel and the multiple service system that serve the educational, emotional, physical, social, and cultural needs of children and families. The following actions are needed to ensure this broader workforce is prepared and supported to implement the Redesign:

- Shift the **organizational culture** to embrace the values and strategies of Redesign as reflected by agency policies, practices, structures and functions being aligned and consistent with Redesign objectives.
- Expand **workforce capacity** to meet demand:
 - Recruit and retain sufficient qualified workforce members to fulfill functional roles required by Redesign.
 - Fortify the workforce with new partnerships at the state, county and community levels.
- Effectively partner with **Resource Foster Families** (kinship and foster parents) to achieve child and family outcomes.
- Build **skills and competencies** of the workforce to promote desired outcomes, especially with vulnerable populations (e.g., chronic neglect, children age 0-5, homeless families, poverty, and substance abusing parents).
- Establish an **integrated learning system** to deliver the knowledge, techniques, support and resources to prepare and support the workforce for success.
- **Measure results of workforce development** efforts to build, maintain, prepare and support the child welfare workforce and make adjustments as needed.

- **Support manageable workloads** to allow sufficient time and capacity for workforce members to practice enhanced family engagement, comprehensive assessment and other relationship-based techniques essential for the Redesign.

In addition to the objectives described above, system-wide changes are needed to ensure that sufficient capacity for funding, partnerships and evaluation exist to sustain the Redesign on a broad scale over time. No one agency can implement the Redesign on its own; it will require the shared responsibility across multiple systems invested in the safety and well-being of California's children and families. What these system-wide reforms seek to accomplish and what actions it will take to implement them are summarized below.

STRENGTHEN *Inter-Agency Partnerships at the State and Local Levels*

The population served by the child welfare system is affected by a variety of issues that are addressed through a number of different systems. The Redesign plan focuses on the need for systems coordination and integration between CWS and the domains of Drug and Alcohol Programs, CalWORKs and the courts. These can serve as models for equivalent discussions and actions to occur in other areas such as domestic violence, mental health, education and others. To best meet the needs of the families served by these multiple systems and achieve positive outcomes, it is imperative that there exists a well coordinated inter-agency system that promotes the following actions:

- **Cross-train inter-agency workforce members** on effective assessment, service coordination and case planning techniques.
- Enhance **service integration and coordination** between CWS, alcohol and drug programs, CalWORKs, the courts, mental health, education, domestic violence, and other agencies to better address the key risk factors of child maltreatment.
- Blend **multiple funding streams** to leverage partnering agencies' jurisdictional spending authority.
- Encourage leadership of the **court to promote greater inter-agency coordination** among agencies and providers involved in child protection and family well-being.
- Establish a **less adversarial court environment** through alternative methods for dispute resolution, standard safety assessment approach, team decision-making and realistic timelines to promote family change.

Children from families with annual incomes below \$15,000 per year are 22 times more likely to experience some form of maltreatment.

Substance abuse is a significant factor in approximately 80% of child maltreatment cases.

EXPAND AND RESTRUCTURE *Child Welfare Financing*

The resource reality of the CWS Redesign is compelling California to develop a comprehensive approach to expand and restructure child welfare financing. The Redesign provides strategies and methods for improving outcomes that will be the return on our investment in the lives of families and children we serve. Initial support for Redesign implementation has already begun. Examples include the state's commitment to provide CWS oversight resources for training and technical assistance for the Redesign and recently established state and county partnerships with philanthropy to help support social work practice and evaluation of results. However, these alone are insufficient to fully implement the Redesign. For this reason, the Stakeholders have identified the following strategies and actions to help achieve this goal:

- Seek approval for **more flexible use of federal and state funds** rather than being tied to categories of service in order to maximize existing public resources.
- Restructure and realign State support with **fiscal strategies** for use by counties to optimally implement the Redesign across all sectors who will now share responsibility for child protection and child and family well-being. The fiscal strategies are:
 1. Reconfiguring the CWS Allocation
 2. Permanent Waiver Authority
 3. Flexible Funding
 4. Performance Based Contracting
 5. Title IV-E Training Waiver
 6. Contracted Administrative Support
 7. Funding Multi-Disciplinary Teams
 8. Reinvesting Foster Care Savings
 9. Interagency Coordination
 10. Child Care for Employed Foster Parents
- Develop **strategic partnerships with philanthropy and First 5** to leverage public funds with private resources to support achieving better results for children and families.
- Establish a **Fiscal Training Academy** to ensure all program and fiscal staff of CWS and its partners have the resources and knowledge to restructure the financing of child welfare services.
- Advocate for **child welfare financing reform** at the national level consistent with federal requirements for child safety, permanence and well-being.

ACHIEVE BETTER OUTCOMES through Accountability

The impetus for demonstrating success derives from the Stakeholders' vision to ensure that every child in California has the opportunity to live in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities. The Federal Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs) and associated program improvement planning process represent a national agenda for change and reinforce the urgency of improving California's Child Welfare Services system. At the State and local levels, continuous quality improvement is assured through the statewide accountability and monitoring system mandated by Assembly Bill 636. This legislation, authored by Assembly member Steinberg (chaptered October 10, 2001), and signed into law by Governor Davis is also known as the Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability System. Outlined below are the key elements needed to implement these accountability mechanisms:

- Achieve specific goals outlined in the federally required **Program Improvement Plan** to make changes guided by the strategic directions of the Redesign.
- Track performance measures related to the Redesign through the **Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability** process.
- Establish a **Redesign Practice Framework** to document and transfer practice standards, protocols and lessons learned.
- Establish a centralized **Evidence-Based Practice Clearinghouse** to evaluate and communicate to the workforce promising practices that are effective in reaching positive outcomes for children and families.
- Ensure **fair and equitable outcomes** for all children and families through the following mechanisms:
 - Change the **dynamics of bias** through partnerships, inclusion and engagement.
 - Use emerging **tools and evidence-based practices** to ensure fairness and equity while addressing the disproportionality that exists in the current system.
 - **Prepare and support the workforce** to promote fair and equitable outcomes.
 - **Measure results** and use information to improve outcomes.

CWS Redesign Implementation Plan

The Redesign is the long term strategic approach to improve the child welfare service system. There are important milestones at each stage of implementation. The Redesign implementation plan addresses the following topics:

- **County Incorporation of Redesign:**
How and when child welfare partners will join in the Redesign effort and how early phases of implementation will proceed.
- **Partners and Systems:**
How other agencies and programs will come together with CWS to make change happen.
- **Fiscal Strategies:**
How we will pay for the Redesign.
- **Legislative Strategies:**
How and when the Redesign will be authorized and supported.
- **Technology:**
How and when Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) will be aligned with the Redesign.
- **Outcomes and Accountability:**
How we will know we are on track for achieving Federal and State outcomes.

Conclusion

With the destination selected—improved outcomes—and the road maps charted, the time for moving forward has begun. Implementation of the Redesign represents a systemic change led by Child Welfare Services, but grounded in the fabric of the community. Critical to our success are people at the state, county, community and neighborhood levels joining together in a comprehensive effort to ensure every child in California will live in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities. The Redesign is long-term in its commitment and the time to act is now—incrementally and inclusively to ensure the roots of transformation run deep to continually renew and maintain our commitment to positive outcomes for all children and families across California.