Background

The Emergency Child Care Bridge Program (Bridge) was enacted in the 2017-18 budget to mitigate one of the top barriers to finding and maintaining stable family homes for children in foster care, lack of access to affordable child care. Research demonstrated that the initial stage of placement is when children are at greatest risk for experiencing placement instability, especially in the first six to seven months. Evidence also suggested that infants experience the most placement moves during the first month of their placement as compared to older children.

Reducing placement instability was an impetus for the creation of the program. It was designed to address the needs of prospective working foster parents, relative caregivers, and parenting foster youth by providing:

- Vouchers to pay for child care for 6-12 months,
- Navigators to assist families with accessing long-term child care (regardless of whether they are using a voucher), and,
- Training and coaching to child care providers on how to best meet the needs of children who have experienced abuse and neglect.

From 2017 to 2022, annual funding for the Bridge program grew from $31 million to $87.1 million in order to meet the child care needs of caregivers who need this support as well as some expansion of allowable uses to provide counties with flexibilities in order to best serve families with compelling needs. In the 2025-26 state budget, the program was reduced by $30 million ongoing, leaving $57.1 million ongoing in the program. Currently, 48 counties are participating in this program.

Problem

Most foster parents work outside the home and rely on child care during their working hours. While families are provided with resources to meet a child's basic needs, the resources are not enough to also cover the cost of child care. Additionally, the emergency nature of placements and long wait lists for most child care providers present significant barriers to accessing child care. In some cases, the need for child care emerges later on in the placement, and without timely support, a stable home can quickly become at risk.

Compounding these challenges is the high staff turnover and burnout resulting in a consistent churn of social work staff. A recent state audit of Alameda County found that for fiscal years 2019–20 through 2024–25, the Department of Child and Family Service's vacancy rates doubled from 17 percent to 34 percent for child welfare workers and more than doubled from 8 percent to about 18 percent for supervisors.[1] Nationwide, high rates of staff turnover have plagued child protection agencies, and retaining a highly qualified workforce has become even more difficult in recent years.[2] These busy or new social workers may not be aware of the Bridge program or forget to inform a resource family of their eligibility for it. Yet, these social workers are the only ones able to determine eligibility of foster children for the voucher component of the program, leaving families without the child care needed to preserve a placement.

Proposed Solution

This proposal would allow Bridge Navigators to submit referrals to county child welfare agencies for their approval of a voucher for an eligible foster child. Social workers would retain full authority to determine eligibility, but they would no longer be the sole gatekeepers to initiating the process. This would alleviate some of the pressure on social workers and allow another trusted partner working with the child and family to leverage this critical support. It will strengthen the original intent of the Bridge Program – ensuring child care is not a barrier to keeping children in safe, stable family homes.

Contact

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[1] See https://www.auditor.ca.gov/reports/2024-108/
[2] See https://www.casey.org/turnover-costs-and-retention-strategies/