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Fewer families welcome foster kids

Reports blame state's low reimbursement rates as cost of living rises.

By Judy Lin - Bee Capitol Bureau

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The number of Californians welcoming foster children into their homes has plummeted 30 percent in the last decade, and tumbled even more in some counties like Sacramento and San Bernardino, according to two new reports being released today by county welfare and children's advocates.

The reports cite low reimbursement rates as one of the main reasons counties aren't able to find and retain more foster family homes. The state has not granted an increase in six years even though the cost of living has risen more than 20 percent.

"It's a sad reflection on the priority we place on taking care of abused and neglected kids," said Frank Mecca, executive director of the County Welfare Directors Association, one of three organizations issuing the reports. "If they were our children, we'd never treat them this way."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants to maintain the rate in his proposed 2007-08 budget as part of an ongoing effort to balance the state budget, said Shirley Washington, a spokeswoman with the state Department of Social Services.

"We are not reducing the current benefit level but doing this in order to get the entire state where it needs to be," Washington said. She said the governor has made significant investments to provide for the safety, permanency and well-being of foster care youths.

On Monday, both the Senate and Assembly budget subcommittees slipped into the budget a 5 percent cost-of-living increase for foster families. Whether the Republican governor agrees to the increase remains to be seen as he negotiates with the Democratic-controlled Legislature.

Welfare and children's advocates, who are announcing the reports' findings at the Capitol today, say California is facing a crisis in finding enough families willing to accept the state's nearly 80,000 foster children needing stable homes.

In surveying California counties, the reports showed the supply of licensed foster homes fell by 30 percent over the last 10 years. Sacramento, Santa Clara, San Mateo and Sonoma reported losing between 45 and 50 percent. San Bernardino County topped the list by falling 61 percent.

The overall drop translates to roughly 3,000 homes statewide and more than 18,000 potential placements, since each home can be licensed for up to six children.

For years, south Sacramento foster mother Hilda Navarro and her husband, Francisco, have had to spend \$600 to \$700 of their own money every month to care for two brothers, ages 9 and 11, with special needs. Expenses range from uniforms and equipment for school sports to the unexpected, such as replacing lamps smashed during temper tantrums.

The boys require therapy and medication in addition to clothes and shoes to fit their growing bodies. Their grocery tab has ballooned to \$400 a week.

"I feel like we're losing a lot of foster family homes," said Navarro, who receives \$600 for each boy from the state per month. "You want to help these kids, but (with) the amount they give you, you can't."

Currently, foster families receive \$425 to \$597 a month per child to provide basic care and support, depending on age. Families like the Navarros receive more for taking in children with special needs.

Advocates noted that families who continue to open up their homes to foster children are having a more difficult time meeting basic living needs, let alone extra costs such as tutoring and sports.

"Most foster parents are not wealthy people," Mecca said. "(The families) just need a little bit of help, such as extra tutoring, which is a sad but common characteristic of foster-care children."

Advocates say investing in well-rounded children who will be able to care for themselves into adulthood will save taxpayers untold billions. Mecca said the current record spending on state prisons due to overcrowding should be enough to motivate state leaders to invest in California's youth.

Assemblyman Jim Beall, D-San Jose, has written Assembly Bill 324, which would give foster families cost-of-living adjustments for the next five years, beginning with a 5 percent increase at the start of next year at a cost of \$5 million. The bill also provides \$25 million in foster and adoptive family supports, such as respite care.

Beall said that, in addition to getting Schwarzenegger to agree to the 5 percent increase in this year's budget, he wants the Legislature and governor to approve AB 324 so foster families get automatic annual increases.

"It's the morally and fiscally responsible thing to do," Beall said.

The reports are "No Family, No Future," produced by the County Welfare Directors Association and Legal Advocates for Permanent Parenting, and "They Deserve a Family" by the Children's Advocacy Institute of California.

The reports also found that putting a child in a licensed foster home is far cheaper for taxpayers than placing children into foster family agencies or group homes, which are intended for children with larger emotional and behavioral problems.

A group home costs \$1,454 to \$6,371 a month. The statewide average of the cost of raising a child is \$709.

When foster children are placed in institutional settings like group homes, they are at greater risk for developmental, medical and long-term personality disorders, according to the reports.

Navarro, who founded the Hispanic Foster Parent Association, has taken in 68 children in the 15 years she's been a foster mother. She has been with one of the brothers since birth and the other for the past four years.

"I feel like they're mine," Navarro said. "I never see them as my foster kids. We always tell them, 'You're our sons.' "

In addition to a cost-of-living raise, she would like to see some relief for foster parents in the form of respite care.

Navarro said the last time she and her husband took a vacation was three years ago to her hometown of Zacatecas, Mexico. Even then, she brought her biological daughters and foster children along.

"It's not like regular work," Navarro said. "We never have vacation."

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