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Foster Children Deserve Better

Foster children have had a tough break in life and need some help. They have been abused or neglected and find themselves under the jurisdiction of the California Juvenile Court – not as criminals, but as victims. The court's job is to place these children in the best environment to give them a chance in life.

But the choices are limited, and are diminishing each year. The number of foster families is constantly in decline, while there has been a steady increase of foster children in need of placement. In other words, demand far outweighs the supply. The need has been met in large part by the growth of so-called foster group homes. The difference between foster families and group homes often is the difference between a home and a facility. A foster family finds room in its home for a child, lives with the child and sometimes even offers the hope for adoption. A group home is more business-like, operated by a paid staff and offering more professional services.

Group homes are expensive, costing taxpayers \$3,000 or more per month per child. Foster families are paid just over \$350 per month for an infant and a couple hundred dollars more for older children. Despite a modest 6 percent increase that will take effect this summer, foster families often must dig into their own pockets to cover the cost of necessities for their foster children. Many cannot afford to do so, and stop taking children, thus contributing to the loss of foster families.

While foster families are forced to skimp, group homes have become a multimillion-dollar industry. Journalists and grand juries have uncovered a fundamentally flawed group home system where countless millions of dollars have been diverted to from child support to profit-taking. They have written of executives drawing six-figure incomes and charging the home exorbitant rent, while children are left to fend for themselves.

Not all group homes are bad, and many are operating well with dedicated staff. But the system provides financial opportunities for group homes and financial disincentives for foster families. By throwing large sums of money at group homes, we are asking for abuse, and we are getting it from those without a conscience.

Money flows to power in Sacramento, and group homes are powerful. Often, they have big-name members on their boards of directors and high-powered lobbyists with financially motivated executive directors. The problem is compounded by the State Department of Social Services, which has abdicated any meaningful oversight of group homes.

Recently, a legislative task force on group homes, co-chaired by a group home lobbyist, studied the industry and devised 50 possible actions, most of which are meant to be short-term improvements. It is hard to believe that many of these common-sense suggestions are not already standard operating procedures – such as background checks and basic training for staff – given the \$3,000-per-month price per child. Yet, to implement such basics the task force recommended an increase in government-provided group home rates!

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Money has simply created the wrong incentives for some group home operators. Foster children should not be a profitable commodity where the incentive is to keep the commodity in the facility. If a foster child is adopted, the home loses \$36,000 in revenue per year. Perhaps that is the reason some children are never adopted from group homes. Maybe that is the reason group homes readily accept thousands of children who are not in need of professional care, but would do just fine in a foster family setting. Experts acknowledge that those children are better off with foster families and can be harmed in the institutional group home environment – something they have been denied most of their lives.

Overuse of group homes wastes money and does not help children. Foster families and group homes should be paid the exact same basic rate for children, a fair rate that ensures reimbursement for reasonable costs. If a child needs more professional help, we should increase the rate to pay for those services separately, whether the child is in the family setting or group home setting. The rate should follow the child, similar to the voucher system. The idea, called "wrap-around services" would attract more foster families and ensure that professional services are delivered to those who need them, while removing the financial incentive of profit-taking by some home executives.

Most experts familiar with the foster care system readily admit that it is an industry wrought with fiscal mismanagement, lack of accountability and poor care. Foster children deserve better if they are to have a decent chance of success in life.

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