

PROTECT VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES: ENSURE OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF REALIGNED CHILD WELFARE SERVICES PROGRAMS



CHILDREN NOW



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Under realignment, the State's role in child welfare must change considerably, to one with a more expansive approach to ensuring the safety, health and well-being of children in California's child welfare system. Without such changes, the federal mandate for a statewide child welfare system may not be met, resulting in penalties, increased litigation, and vulnerable children being denied services.

Realignment is taking place in the context of ongoing—and not yet completely successful—efforts to bring county child welfare systems into compliance with federal and state outcome measures related to child safety, permanency and well-being. Realignment creates a fiscal incentive to reduce costs which, in turn, may pressure county child welfare departments to de-emphasize investigation of abuse/neglect reports and minimize opening of new cases.

It is crucial that the child welfare system outcome measures include a focus on the quality and accuracy of abuse/neglect investigations and the effectiveness of county agencies' "primary prevention" efforts to reduce the incidence of abuse or neglect (e.g., through nurse home visiting programs and other voluntary community-based services for at-risk children and families), and "secondary prevention" efforts to stop abuse and neglect from reoccurring after a substantiated incident, through either voluntary or court-mandated services and interventions.

After realignment, CDSS will have no direct fiscal investment in county child welfare programs, and the counties will have the option to reduce or eliminate non-mandatory programs without noticing CDSS. This may make it difficult for CDSS to determine if the flexibility inherent in realignment is actually causing negative outcomes for at-risk families and children and take effective corrective action. It is critical, therefore that Counties be required to report to CDSS their intent to eliminate non-required programs and services, detailing how the needs of the children and families formerly served by these programs will be addressed, and how the County will ensure that children are not placed at increased risk of abuse or neglect.

We propose the following actions be taken to minimize harm to at-risk children and youth and to ensure adequate oversight and accountability of realigned child welfare services programs:

- 1. Develop enhanced accountability measures focused on both primary prevention efforts and secondary prevention efforts.**
- 2. Establish threshold measures that trigger mandatory enforcement action by the Department of Social Services.**
- 3. Balance flexibility with accountability for maintenance of effort by counties in providing for the needs of vulnerable children and families.**