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Legislative push seeks more aid for foster care

By Clea Benson - Bee Capitol Bureau

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California foster parents get about \$500 per month in public funds for each abused or neglected child placed in their homes.

Advocates say that's far less than it costs to feed, clothe and care for the children who are wards of the state. And that amount hasn't gone up in seven years.

At a rally at the Capitol on Tuesday, advocates said raising the rates the state pays foster families is a priority this year in their efforts to improve life for the nearly 80,000 California children who have been taken from their parents' custody.

Assemblyman Jim Beall, a San Jose Democrat, has written Assembly Bill 324 to raise the rates by 5 percent and provide for cost-of-living adjustments over the next five years.

But lawmakers and advocates say that's just one step. There is still a long road ahead, they say, before the foster-care system is strong enough to give children a good chance of success later in life.

Driven in part by the threat of federal fines if improvements weren't made, lawmakers and state officials have worked over the past few years to improve foster children's safety and to speed up the rate at which they are placed in permanent homes.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Legislature added about \$80 million to the child-welfare budget last year, much of that to decrease social-worker caseloads. Schwarzenegger has proposed a smaller increase of about \$19 million this year for supportive housing for emancipated foster youths.

Reviews of the progress on foster care have been mixed.

"I'm very excited," said Assemblywoman Karen Bass, a Los Angeles Democrat who chairs a select committee on foster care that has grown to include 18 members, both Republicans and Democrats. "You have a bipartisan, bicameral effort going on. There's renewed awareness and interest in this issue. ... To me, it means it will continue to be a priority and we will continue to move forward."

Others say the state is moving too slowly -- and needs to make a much bigger investment more quickly.

Robert Fellmeth, director of the San Diego-based Children's Advocacy Institute, pointed to a recent study by his organization that showed the state provides foster youths with less than 5 percent of the financial support that average parents spend on their young adult children.

Instead of incremental funding increases, Fellmeth said, the state needs to invest at least another \$170 million each year in foster care right away. Fellmeth also said the state spends far more on children who live in group homes than on children who are living with foster families.

"They've given these kids less than 10 percent of what they need," Fellmeth said. "Whenever we lobby for anything that costs money, we get complete blockage."

Frank Mecca, head of the County Welfare Directors Association, said the state has made strides in areas such as reducing social-worker caseloads. But he agreed that funding was still an issue.

"There's a lot going right, but there's a lot of work still to do," said Mecca, whose organization represents county officials who are responsible for running child-welfare programs.

Jennifer Rodriguez, an attorney who grew up in foster care, said the foster youths she talks to are experiencing many of the same problems that have persisted for years: Many bounce from home to home, alienated from relatives who might be able to help them, and face a lack of support once they turn 18.

"I feel like the difference between when I started doing this work and now is that there is a much better awareness of what the problems are," said Rodriguez, 30, policy director of an organization called the California Youth Connection. "So many foster youth have had the chance to tell their experiences and tell people who are making policy and in the media what life is like."

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