

Accord Hikes Foster Care Budget

Members of both parties embrace the addition of \$83 million in funds for children who should have 'the very best.'

By Nancy Vogel, Times Staff Writer

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SACRAMENTO — Assemblywoman Karen Bass, a Los Angeles Democrat, stood on a Capitol balcony several months ago talking about the plight of foster children, most of whom have been abused or neglected.

Nearby, Assemblyman Dennis Mountjoy, a Republican from Monrovia, happened to overhear.

"We're the caregivers of these children," interjected Mountjoy, who is as conservative as Bass is liberal. "We ought to do the very best we can."

The realization that this sentiment existed on both sides of the political aisle led to a big boost in what the state will spend on foster children this year. The rare agreement of Sacramento Democrats and Republicans to increase social services spending makes foster youths one of the few groups to get more money this year than last, an increase of more than \$83 million.

The funds will help the 75,000 or so California children, from infants to teenagers, who are taken from their parents for their own safety, sometimes for a few days, sometimes forever.

Legislators also have written a raft of bills aimed at improving these bleak statistics: Within four years of leaving the foster care system at 18, roughly one-quarter of youths are homeless, one-quarter are incarcerated and one-third receive welfare. Fewer than 1% graduate from college.

"These kids get into this critical situation through no fault of their own doing," said Assemblyman Bill Maze (R-Visalia), "yet through our system we have brought additional disadvantage to them. I don't think we are by any means doing all we can for them."

The attention from politicians, as well as changes at the federal level, make some who work with foster children hope they are on the verge of genuine reform, not just a period of government hand-wringing.

They credit Bass, who has vowed to make foster care a top priority until term limits end her Assembly tenure in 2010, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who wrote in May to Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez (D-Los Angeles) that "we have an obligation to act" given the "sobering statistics" about foster youth.

"They're not just people who vote aye," said Frank Mecca, who represents county social workers as director of the County Welfare Directors Assn. of California. "They're champions."

In Los Angeles County, roughly 21,000 children are wards of government. Some are taken in by volunteers. Others live in privately run, government-funded group homes. Most have been neglected by single parents with such serious problems as mental illness, drug addiction or poverty.

California's system of judges, social workers and foster parents costs federal and state taxpayers \$4.3 billion a year. But in testimony earlier this year before a foster care committee created by Bass, young people in the foster system said it fails to give them a good start in life.

They complained of social workers too overwhelmed to return their calls, caregivers who abused them, brothers and sisters they could not reach and guardians who forced prescription drugs on them, claiming they were needed to treat behavioral problems.

"They across the board say that they do not feel that there is an adult who is not paid that cares about them," said Bass. "And that they are moved too many times, and that sometimes they don't even know why they're moved.

"They complain about the medication they take and not knowing why they take it or that they are taking too much. What they request from adults is a mentor, an adult who is in their lives who is not paid."

Many of the problems they describe, Bass said, could be resolved if social workers had more time to spend with their charges.

Of the new money, \$50 million can be used for hiring social workers. Those county employees normally juggle at least twice as many cases as recommended in a study the Legislature ordered six years ago.

"If you're a worker and you've got 50 different families," Mecca said, "it's a certainty that you cannot possibly be providing the level of monitoring and case management and personal attention and assistance the family needs so they can be reunited."

The budget includes \$4 million to help the thousands of foster children who find themselves without a place to live when they are emancipated.

"Every year around 4,300 kids age out of foster care, and two of three have an imminent housing need," said Amy Lemley, policy director of the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes, a nonprofit founded by the former state Senate leader.

The increased funding is expected to allow other counties to replicate a program used in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. There, youths recently emancipated from the foster system can pay an escalating portion of rent on subsidized apartments.

The nonprofit First Place Fund for Youth leases about 100 apartments around those counties, said executive director Sam Cobbs. The former foster children start out paying 15% to 20% of the rent, after taking an "economic literacy" class and drafting a budget. By the end of two years, ideally, they are paying the full rent and able to stay in the apartment as long as they wish.

"If you can do it here, you can do it anywhere in the state," said Cobbs, noting the Bay Area's notoriously high rents. As many as 80% of the young people in the program will secure a long-term home, he said.

Karenda Williams, an 18-year-old former foster child, lives in a one-bedroom apartment near Oakland's Lake Merritt with her 1-year-old son. First Place Fund pays most of the \$850 monthly rent while Williams studies to become a medical assistant. She'd probably be homeless otherwise, she said.

"It was like a dream come true," said Williams, whose mother kicked her out after she became pregnant.

There is also \$4 million in the budget to help with the adoption of "hard to place" — generally that means teenage — foster youths so that they don't turn 18 and land on their own without some kind of family support. Some of that money will pay to expand the use of specialized Internet searches that can turn up extended family members.

"I call it family-finding on steroids," said retired Santa Clara County Juvenile Court Judge Leonard Edwards. "The more we can expand our knowledge of the family connections a child has, the more likely we are to find a safe permanent home."

There is \$8 million in the budget to make sure that relatives, who care for nearly 40% of California's foster children, don't lose state financial support when they take permanent responsibility for children. Until now, state payments ranging from \$25 to \$1,425 a month, depending on the needs of a child, disappeared once a relative became a legal guardian. The money in the budget that took effect July 1 will continue those payments.

"They're the backbone of our whole system," Lemley said. "It's a system built on the kindness of these families."

Another \$4 million is earmarked to expand drug dependency courts, which emphasize treatment over incarceration and allow families to stay together. And \$5.7 million will supplement federal college scholarship money, which doesn't always arrive in time for foster children to buy books and pay rent.

The rest of the money will be used to broaden services for foster children who are not in group homes.

Advocates welcome the money, but they say they also want more fundamental reform. They say spending money to manage the drug addiction and mental health problems that often lead to neglect could reduce the need for foster care.

Under a new deal with the federal government, that will soon be easier.

The federal government pays \$1.9 billion of the \$4.3 billion spent on California's foster system. Until this year, California couldn't use the money to help troubled families unless a child was removed from a home by a social worker.

But the Schwarzenegger administration won a waiver that allows counties to spend federal money helping parents without breaking up families. Twenty counties can participate for five years starting in October.

Officials in Los Angeles County, a leader in the move to get the federal rule changed, say they plan to help parents with relationship counseling, parenting and homemaking skills, and drug addiction and mental health treatment.

Between 2000 and today, the number of children placed out of their homes in Los Angeles County has fallen from roughly 45,000 to 21,000. A preventive approach should help drive it lower, said Mitch Mason, chief of governmental affairs for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services.

"Raising kids in foster care does not promote good outcomes," said Mason. "There are some kids that have achieved great success, but kids need families. They need permanency in their lives."