



# CWS

Stakeholders Group

## *Summary of CWS Stakeholders Conceptual Framework*

*Year Two Report*

February 2003



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Health and Human Services Agency  
Grantland Johnson, Secretary

Department of Social Services  
Rita Saenz, Director

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744 P Street, Sacramento, CA 95814



Dear Californians:

In 2000 Governor Davis asked me, as Director of the California Department of Social Services, to appoint a culturally diverse group of key child welfare stakeholders to examine the current child welfare system and make recommendations on how to improve it.

The Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group has grown from its original membership of sixty individuals, representing a rich array of interests, to hundreds of other individuals also representing the spectrum of child welfare stakeholders throughout the State. The following document represents the collective knowledge, experience, and commitment of all these stakeholders. Their recommendations advance a spectrum of approaches including collaboration across formal and informal support systems, prevention and early intervention services, non-adversarial engagement of families, fairness and equity infused into all decision points, assessment as the foundation for service plans, and accountability for outcomes.

I will seriously consider these recommendations as a basis for the work ahead with the counties and federal government. I will move with a sense of urgency and will continue to actively engage, as is suggested in the recommendations, with our community partners including foundations. And, I will strive to ensure that individual California citizens who want to serve children will also be engaged and acknowledged.

It is with great pride and appreciation that I accept these Recommendations for a CWS Redesign and urge all child welfare stakeholders to help in these efforts to improve the lives of abused and neglected children. Working together to implement these recommendations will ensure that children in the CWS system can now have the same chance at the American Dream as our own children because – they are our children!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Rita Saenz'.

RITA SAENZ  
Director





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February 15, 2003

Rita Saenz, Director  
California Department of Social Services  
744 P Street  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Director Saenz:

It is with great pleasure that the CWS Stakeholders Group presents for your consideration the 30 recommendations to be utilized in the redesign of child welfare. These recommendations represent the second year report of the CWS Stakeholders Group work and synthesize the detailed and expansive analysis completed in the **CWS Redesign: Conceptual Framework** report in May 2002. This report summarizes these recommendations that present an integrated approach to the practice elements and systems within the child welfare continuum.

The CWS Stakeholders laid the foundational work in the development of assumptions, a vision, a mission and guiding values in Year One. In Year Two the work moved to creating the conceptual framework with detailed strategies, and in the Third, and final Year, the CWS Stakeholders Group has moved from strategies and recommendations to implementation plans. The plans will be based upon the foundational assumptions and the Year Two conceptual work. They provide the flexibility required in a state as geographically immense and diverse as California.

Our sincere thanks to you and Governor Davis for the awesome opportunity we have had to participate in this historic work to create a better life for California's children and families.

CWS STAKEHOLDERS GROUP  
(members listed on inside front cover)

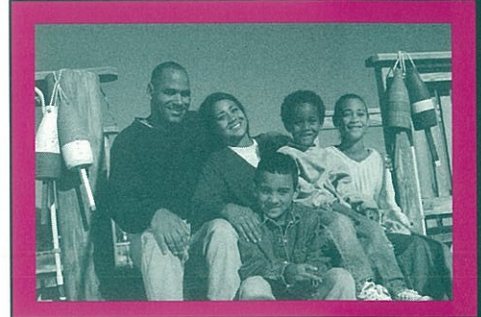
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a new vision for the Child Welfare Services program in California, a vision of every child living in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by healthy families and strong communities. California's current Child Welfare Services program has evolved over the years, benefiting most of the abused and neglected children and their families who are served. These positive outcomes are a tribute to the dedicated Social Workers and county administrators who are informed by:



- What we know about human development and capacity to change behaviors;
- Findings from California's renowned child welfare research institutions;
- Leadership in establishing cutting edge reforms in social services;
- Legislative reforms to deal with systemic problems, one at a time; and
- Significant funding increases under the Governor Davis Administration.

These factors alone will not result in fully realizing California's vision for Child Welfare Services so that everyone benefits. For the children and families served, for the professionals involved with Child Welfare Services and for this Administration, one child left in the home of parents who are not able to nurture is one child too many. One child who languishes in foster care without a permanent home is one child too many.

## Formation of the Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group

For this reason, Governor Gray Davis initiated the Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group in July 2000 and charged them with creating and sustaining a flexible system, comprised of public and private partnerships, that provides a comprehensive system of support for families and communities to ensure the well-being of every child. Due to the complexity of the task ahead, the Stakeholders Group was given three years to complete its work. It consists of 60 individuals representing all aspects of the child welfare community and has sparked unprecedented interest and support across multiple sectors. Through a proactive examination of the Child Welfare Services program within its community context, the Child Welfare Services Redesign proposed by the Stakeholders Group seeks to affect that change throughout California with fairness, equity and accountability for outcomes.

## Progress of the Stakeholders Group to date and third year activities

During the first two years, the Stakeholders Group members worked diligently, undertaking intensive research and consulting with lay and professional experts to explore the underlying assumptions of the current child welfare services system and establish a new set of principles as the foundation for the future of the program. They identified current practices that should be incorporated into the new way of doing business and established a system for testing promising practices to ensure that they are effective in achieving desired outcomes for children and families. The group's preliminary proposals are published in a 230-page report entitled



*Child Welfare Services Redesign: Conceptual Framework* (May 2002). This document summarizes and integrates the information from that report and includes 30 recommendations for moving toward a new direction for California's Child Welfare Services program in the twenty-first century.

In its third and final year of work the Stakeholders Group is preparing a detailed plan to implement the conceptual framework that will be presented to the Director of the California Department of Social Services, Rita Saenz, in June 2003. Consistent with the model of practice proposed in this framework, the Stakeholders Group has expanded participation in the crafting of the implementation plan by joining with many more child welfare stakeholders in counties throughout the state in regional working sessions. The county child welfare administrators were partners in this effort and were instrumental in gaining participation from the many diverse players who are committed to achieving successful reform.

### **Key issues in Child Welfare Services**

California is at a critical juncture to demonstrate success in providing Child Welfare Services. The state's foster care caseload represents about 20 percent of the nation's total. For years consistently high numbers of child abuse reports have been challenging the capacity of the system to respond effectively. The social, emotional and developmental cost to the children served is profound. Many cases involve children under five years of age, with African-American children substantially over-represented. For many of the children who are in the child welfare system their parents are burdened with substance abuse, domestic violence or mental health problems, creating an environment of chronic neglect for their children. California is not alone—nearly every state is facing similar trends – and is joining states such as Illinois and New York to restructure the Child Welfare Services Program.

### **What has already been done to improve Child Welfare Services**

**Best practices:** California's child welfare agencies, other service providers and researchers have invested countless hours of attention, study and innovation to meet the challenges before them. Many counties have developed and implemented models of practice that have resulted in successful outcomes for children and families, and these models will be retained in the recommended Redesign. Some examples are:

- Family-to-Family – foster parents are recruited from the children's own neighborhood so that they can stay in the same school, keep their friends and visit their birth parents as appropriate to a plan for reunification.
- Wraparound – children with severe mental health problems are able to remain in the home of their birth or foster parents, supported by an intensive array of services, rather than being placed in residential treatment.
- Integration with CalWORKs –families who are recipients of both CalWORKs and Child Welfare Services receive coordinated services to leverage maximum effectiveness from each program.



- Family Resource Centers – families who need help understanding the developmental needs of their children receive guidance and support in a community setting.
- Public Health Nurse Visitation – parents who need instruction on how to care for their young children receive help in their homes from public health nurses.

**Legislative reform:** During the 1999–2000 and the 2001–2002 legislative sessions over 100 bills addressing child welfare issues were passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor. Some highlights of these improvements include:

- Emphasizing that siblings should be placed together.
- Ensuring the rights of foster children to safe, secure and stable living arrangements.
- Giving opportunities to youth who emancipate from foster care to have emotional and financial security.
- Improving the capacity of the child welfare workforce to serve children and families.
- Shifting to accountability for outcomes rather than adherence to regulatory processes.

These legislative reforms built on the following reforms of the 1997–1998 legislative session:

- Bringing California into compliance with the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.
- Instituting “concurrent planning” for children entering foster care so that if the goal of reunification with their birth parents is not achieved, their foster parents will be able to adopt them.
- Assisting relatives to become guardians of foster children by providing financial aid and support services.
- Establishing a transitional housing program for youth who emancipate from foster care.
- Creating the Office of the Ombudsman for Foster Care.
- Increased funding: In recognition of the fact that the Child Welfare Services program has historically been under-funded, Governor Davis increased the total funding by \$429.5 million, a 28 percent increase over the past four years. This includes funding to keep pace with caseload and cost increases, but also includes a substantial amount of funds to reduce caseloads and improve services. However, caseloads continue to remain demandingly high and complex in nature.

In addition to the advances described above, this Administration formed the Stakeholders Group to provide for a unified, systematic, statewide effort to transform the entire program toward achieving more efficient and effective results.



## A Shift in Thinking

The Stakeholders Group identified major shifts in assumptions from the old system to the new that underpin the Redesign philosophy. These shifts in thinking include:

THE CURRENT SYSTEM...	THE REDESIGNED SYSTEM...
...Is based on intervention, which is generally punitive and blames parents; this approach may hold unintended negative consequences for child and family well being.	...Balances parental accountability, individualized assessment of need and engagement of families to maximize safety, permanence and well-being of children and families.
...Experiences capacity limitations of the current service delivery system, resulting in a 92% closure rate at intake followed by repeat referrals of the same families.	...Expands capacity to provide a comprehensive system of services and supports to adequately address unique needs of children and families the first time they are referred to Child Welfare Services.
...Makes child protection the sole responsibility of Child Welfare Services.	...Relies on partnerships between the community and Child Welfare Services to ensure child protection and successful outcomes.
...Is restricted by funding mechanisms which are tied to specific strategies, such as placement of a child in foster care, rather than supporting the most effective service response for each child and family served.	...Allows flexible funding to serve children and families based on what works best for them to reach positive outcomes.
...Has limited means to evaluate what works best in order to launch and sustain effective practices and promising research findings on a statewide scale.	...Implements a systematic means to evaluate, launch and sustain effective practices and research findings on a statewide scale.

With these assumptions in mind, the Stakeholders Group set out to create the new vision for child welfare in California. They began with the needs of children and families, and then challenged themselves to design creative, flexible strategies that meet those needs, regardless of how different that model was from the way things have always been done. In addition, they believe that no single organization can design and deliver services in isolation from the communities in which clients reside. Reaching out to and involving communities and forming partnerships with individuals and organizations that can help deliver effective services and support families long-term is the key to sustainable results.

The Stakeholders Group believes that responsibility to children and families requires interventions that are evidence based and sufficiently tested to demonstrate efficacy. Evidence-based means interventions are supported by research and child welfare professionals are sufficiently trained to competently put the interventions into practice. Once an innovative program



is operational, willingness to track results and invite scrutiny to share learning and make needed improvements is essential. Likewise, any efforts to bring successful innovations to scale statewide cannot be mired in bureaucracy. More important than uniformity of method and means, is a willingness to share knowledge, maintain a leading edge, reward innovation and continually learn from each other to achieve the best outcomes possible for children and families.

## A Focus on Results

In addition to a shift in thinking, the Stakeholders Group also articulated results they want to see happen in California that will demonstrate the Redesign's success. These are:

- All children at risk of being harmed by abuse or neglect are protected.
- Children and families at risk of child abuse and neglect receive the services they need when they need them.
- More families able to safely and consistently care for their children as a result of their involvement with Child Welfare Services and its service partners.
- Fewer and less severe reports and incidents of child maltreatment.
- Families with children in similar situations are afforded equal support to attain safety, permanence and well being regardless of demographic characteristics.
- Children who cannot be cared for safely and consistently by their parents gain permanent families through adoption or guardianship in greater numbers and more quickly.
- Communities are more involved in protecting children and strengthening families.
- More youth who have been served by the child welfare system experience successful transitions to adulthood and have a sense of emotional permanence with at least one surrogate parent.

## Fairness and Equity at the Core

In recognition of the pivotal role fairness and equity have in any reform of the current system, the Stakeholders Group developed a definition to guide all Redesign recommendations. This principle provides practitioners and decision makers with a framework for the new system that will have fairness and equity at its core. This principle reads:

*A fair child welfare system is organized and implemented to provide a supportive institutional response in which each family is offered needed services, taking into account the individual's experience and cultural background, to effectively modify individual behaviors as well as remedy systemic and community problems that negatively affect a child's wellbeing.*

The Redesign recommended by the Stakeholders Group requires deeper knowledge of practice, sharper tools for the task, stronger partnerships to impact results and broader resources to ensure the safety, permanence and well-being of every child and family in California. The Redesign infrastructure addresses the full spectrum of involvement by the Child Welfare



Services program in the lives of children and families. The objectives of child welfare services interventions are to:



- **prevent** child abuse and neglect,
- **preserve** and strengthen families,
- **restore** the capacity of families to care for their children,
- **rebuild** alternate families for children and
- **prepare** youth to become self-sufficient adults.

Each of these six objectives is achieved in the context of supportive relationships provided by the human resources that will make the Redesign happen. It is within these domains that the 30 new recommendations listed here and described in detail within this report are being proposed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Objective #1: Partner to PREVENT Child Abuse and Neglect

The Stakeholders Group has concluded that prevention of child abuse and support of families is a cost-effective strategy to protect and nurture children and maximize the quality of life for California's residents. The practice of prevention is woven into all aspects of the Redesign to build a proactive system that seeks to avert tragedy before it occurs. The Redesign report recommends the following prevention strategies:

1. Formalize the role of Child Welfare Services and partner agencies in prevention across the continuum of services and supports at the state, local and neighborhood levels.
2. Establish a collaborative prevention model based on public-private partnerships at the state, local and neighborhood levels with shared investment in outcomes and accountability.
3. Engage community residents, especially parents and other caregivers, in all partnership and prevention activities.
4. Utilize a strength-based, universal approach to prevention that supports all families.
5. Secure support for a collaborative prevention strategy from legislative and executive branches of State and local government and the general public.
6. Develop dedicated, sustained funding that supports a comprehensive range of prevention strategies.

### Objective #2: Act Early to PRESERVE and Strengthen Families

The Stakeholders Group has focused on how to build a system of early intervention in California communities. The system requires engagement of families to strengthen and preserve their capacity to protect and nurture their children. While the overriding goal remains child safety, changing the intake and response processes of the Child Welfare Services program includes the following strategies:



7. Make child protection and building strong families a shared community responsibility.
8. Empower child welfare staff to offer safety and change oriented services based on family need and level of risk, rather than waiting for proof that maltreatment has occurred.
9. Establish a statewide safety assessment approach to evaluate and manage child safety. Ensure that the approach is universally and consistently applied to all families brought to the attention of Child Welfare Services.
10. Intervene early with vulnerable populations using a comprehensive system of services and supports in partnership with community resources.

### **Objective #3: Broaden Efforts to RESTORE Family Capacity**

Federal law requires that reasonable efforts be made to restore the capacity of birth parents to resume their parental responsibilities. Unfortunately, some situations still will require removal of children from their birth parents' care on either a temporary or permanent basis. When this occurs, the Stakeholders Group envisions a better way for Child Welfare Services to build parental capacity and strengthening natural, meaningful connections between children and their birth family systems. The Stakeholders Group recommends the following strategies:

11. Expand safety assessment and planning to quickly reunify children with their families.
12. Align case plans and related interventions with assessment results using a standardized approach to assessment.
13. Engage birth parents (using specially designed skills) to support the ongoing care of their children and to guarantee the child's continuity of care by family members.
14. Provide sufficient supports and services before *and* after children are returned home to restore autonomy and family bonds temporarily lost during the child's time in care.

### **Objective #4: Strengthen Alternatives to REBUILD Permanent Families for Children**

The Stakeholders Group envisions a redesigned system where children who cannot be cared for by their parents gain permanent families through adoption or guardianship in greater numbers and more quickly. The preferred result for the children served is to remain or return home safely and permanently. However, for many children and families, circumstances preclude this possibility. The Stakeholders Group calls for a renewed commitment to permanence for every child entering out-of-home care using the following strategies:

15. Develop a comprehensive, integrated model of adoption and guardianship practice.
16. Establish a statewide system of reporting and apply the research that addresses children of color experiencing higher rates of entry and longer lengths of stay in out-of-home care.
17. Establish statewide, standard protocols for assessment of children's safety and parents' capacity to protect their children.
18. Develop a model of kinship care practice that recognizes and supports the unique differences inherent in rebuilding permanent families for children with extended family members.
19. Assure sufficient, competent and supported foster family resources.



### **Objective #5: Systematically PREPARE Youth for Success in Adulthood**

One way to determine the efficacy of the Child Welfare Services system is to ask, “How well have youth who have ‘aged out’ of the system fared without gaining a permanent family?” This focus on preparation for adulthood illustrates how the intervention efforts are brought back full circle to prevention. Youth who exit the system positioned for success in their own lives will be much less likely to repeat the pattern of maltreatment with their own children and more likely to become responsible parents themselves. The strategies recommended by Stakeholders Group for this purpose are:

20. Develop a comprehensive, integrated and developmentally staged model of transition planning and services.
21. Train and support caregivers to prepare youth for adult success.
22. Expand community options for safe, affordable housing for youth exiting foster care to live independently.

### **Objective #6: AFFECT CHANGE through an Excellence in Workforce**

The Stakeholders Group asserts that because supporting relationships clearly are the primary mechanism of change for clients in child welfare, the Child Welfare Services workforce needs to be valued, recognized, supported. This workforce is broadly defined to include personnel of county child welfare agencies, the California Department of Social Services and collaborative partners essential to child welfare operations, such as community-based agencies, law enforcement, foster parents and juvenile court personnel. Strategies to promote workforce development are:

23. Engage Counties in an organizational change process that results in a high-capacity, competent and satisfied Child Welfare Services workforce able to perform the essential functions of a new child welfare system.
24. Prepare the Child Welfare Services workforce for systems changes.
25. Build and maintain the capacity of the Child Welfare Services workforce.
26. Support manageable workloads.
27. Build, maintain and reward skills and competencies demonstrated by the Child Welfare Services workforce.
28. Conduct evaluation and research on the effectiveness of efforts to develop the Child Welfare Services workforce.
29. Optimize working environments to achieve positive client outcomes.
30. Develop an evidence-based cycle and web-based clearinghouse to identify and evaluate promising practices for both CWS/social work practice approaches and interventions.

At the very time when there are fewer resources, greater economic challenges and no shortage of public policy demands across California, it may seem extravagant to be suggesting proactive change to improve the child welfare services system. However, this is the very essence of the challenge ahead. Public and private sectors must unite and boldly depart from the reactive, crisis-oriented posture of the past, toward making a proactive, sustainable investment in the future of California’s children and families.