



CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY INSTITUTE
5998 Alcalá Park | San Diego, CA 92110-2492
P: (619) 260-4806 | F: (619) 260-4753
Sacramento Office: (916) 844-5646
Washington, DC Office: (917) 371-5191
www.sandiego.edu/cai | info@caichildlaw.org

September 16, 2025

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor of the State of California
State Capitol, Suite 1173
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: REQUEST FOR SIGNATURE: AB 562 (SOLACHE AND BRYAN)

Dear Governor Newsom:

The Children's Advocacy Institute at the University of San Diego School of Law (CAI), which has sought to advance the well-being of California's children through legal education, advocacy, and litigation for over 30 years, is honored to co-sponsor AB 562 with California Youth Connection (CYC)—a youth-led organization that empowers young people impacted by the foster care system to transform it through legislative and policy change. Together, CAI and CYC respectfully urge you to sign AB 562 (Solache and Bryan).

As the Departments of Social Services, Health Care Services, Education, and Developmental Services acknowledged in January of 2023, "[a]cross the state, family-finding practices and outcomes are highly varied."¹ Why? Relatives do not love children more in some counties than others. Family finding obligations are identically applicable to every county.

The reason why success rates differ is because counties prioritize and operationalize family finding state mandates differently.

WE ALREADY KNOW AB 562'S APPROACH INCREASES THE NUMBER OF ABUSED OR NEGLECTED CHILDREN PLACED WITH THEIR FAMILIES AT LITTLE OR NO COST.

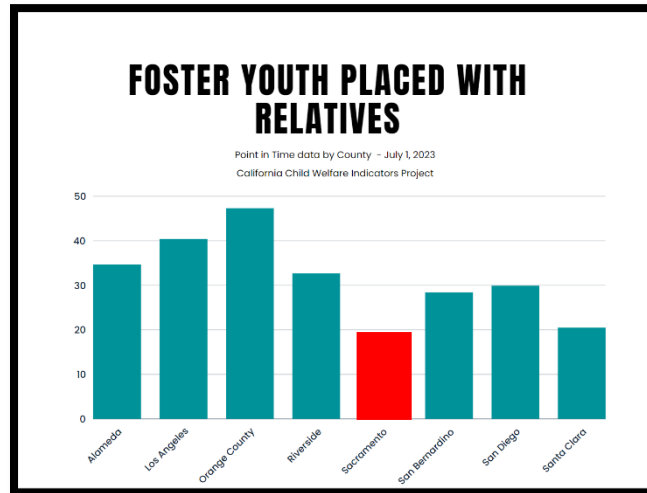
AB 562 is inspired by the family finding improvements that occurred in Sacramento County after a December 2023 report authored by CAI highlighted the dismal record of Sacramento County's efforts to find family placements for its foster children. The report titled *No Family for the Holidays in Sacramento*² received and continues to receive extensive press coverage

¹ <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AB-2083-Multiyear-Plan-for-Increasing-Capacity.pdf> at p. 44

² <https://htv-prod-media.s3.amazonaws.com/files/final-12-20-sac-xmas-report-6584dd38843a8.pdf>

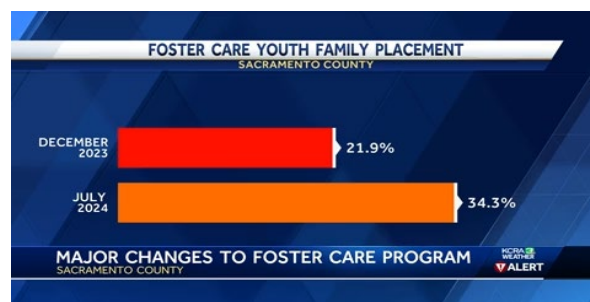
throughout the Central Valley,³ with a Sacramento County grand jury recently highlighting “that the Board of Supervisors should increase the number of teenagers placed with relatives.”⁴

The chart below⁵ from the 2023 report provides a comparison of major county data regarding the percentage of foster youth placed with relatives.



Through this report and the news coverage sparked by it, the County Board of Supervisors at board meetings took notice of Sacramento County’s relatively dismal performance compared to California’s large counties and highlighted to its child welfare department the need to do better.

It worked. Where Sacramento County is concerned, simply prompting a conversation within the County about family finding in December 2023 has prompted the County to do significantly better. Since December 2023:



Indeed, Sacramento County has recently boasted that it has undergone a “culture change”

³ <https://www.kcra.com/article/sacramento-county-foster-ranked-worst-foster-youth/46204775>, <https://www.kcra.com/article/california-bill-foster-care-placement/60447660>, <https://www.kcra.com/article/sacramento-countys-foster-system-for-teens-is-woefully-broken-grand-jury-finds/61099991>

⁴ <https://www.kcra.com/article/sacramento-countys-foster-system-for-teens-is-woefully-broken-grand-jury-finds/61099991>

⁵ Data from California Child Welfare Indicator Project (CCWIP), at <https://ccwip.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/reports/Allegation/MTSG/r/ab636/s>.

that has caused far better family finding outcomes:

And it's working. Since 2023, kinship placements have skyrocketed from 21% to 36%, and nearly 45% of children aged 0-5 are now placed with family or close relations. This isn't just a policy—it's a complete cultural shift in how Sacramento County approaches child welfare.⁶

No new laws. No new state appropriations. This happened because the County was confronted with its dismal record and was thereafter prompted by public scrutiny to do something about it.

BACKGROUND: PLACING FOSTER CHILDREN WITH THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS IS VITALLY IMPORTANT.

As one young person shared in testimony:

When I was a minor, before being placed in an out-of-county group home, I was told by the court that my DNA would be collected and stored in a federal database—not to help find my family, but to identify my body or convict me of future crimes. I was just a kid, labeled as a CSEC youth... and instead of being protected or connected to family, I was criminalized. Years later, I found out my father and siblings were living in my hometown the entire time. No one tried to find them—and no one was held accountable.

AB 562 helps ensure that no child is left wondering "what if?"— and that counties are held accountable for meaningful family-finding efforts.

A Civil Rights Issue. Black children in California make up 5% of the population.⁷ Astonishingly, in California, 21% of the children in foster care are Black.⁸ Thus, the degree to which counties successfully secure futures for the children they have removed from the care of their parents is a civil rights as well as child welfare issue.

The Second Best Thing We Can Do. Placing foster children with family members should be the second biggest priority in foster care, ranking only beneath safely returning a child home to live with their parents. The evidence is unambiguous and conclusive that placing already-

⁶ <https://sacramento.newsreview.com/spotlight/keeping-kin-together/>

⁷ <https://www.kidsdata.org/export/pdf?dem=13>

⁸ <https://www.kidsdata.org/topic/22/foster-in-care-race/table#fmt=19&loc=2,127,347,1763,331,348,336,171,321,345,357,332,324,369,358,362,360,337,327,364,356,217,353,328,354,323,352,320,339,334,365,343,330,367,344,355,366,368,265,349,361,4,273,59,370,326,333,322,341,338,350,342,329,325,359,351,363,340,335&tf=108&ch=7,11,8,10,9,44&sortColumnId=0&sortType=asc> (59,172/12,866)

traumatized children with familiar and supportive family members leads to far better outcomes than placing these children with strangers:

When children are removed they often lose everything they know—their parents, their home, their siblings, friends, school, pets, etc. Placing a child with family diminishes this loss. Additionally, relatives often are willing to take large sibling groups, live in the same neighborhood therefore allowing for continuity of school and community, and provide the comfort of living with someone the child knows and shares a relationship with.⁹

Indeed, the benefits of placing children with kin extend into adulthood:

The connection to family or another supportive adult is critical for older youth. Research shows it is key for youth to have permanent, emotionally sustaining and committed relationships to reach self-sufficiency and to reduce the risk of negative outcomes such as homelessness and criminal involvement.¹⁰

“New research suggests that kinship care [] can improve academic outcomes and long-term success for children in out-of-home care.”¹¹

For these many reasons, California law repeatedly and uniformly instructs counties to strive to place children with relatives or nonrelative extended family members (NREFM). (See, e.g., Welfare & Institutions Code, §§ 309(e), 358(b)(2), 361.3(a), 11391).

Even though neither a family’s love for children nor the laws mandating family finding vary by California geography, county family finding results are, to coin a phrase, all over the map. The most comprehensive public source of data on California’s foster care system is the Berkeley California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP).¹² According to the CCWIP, on July 1, 2023, 32.7% of California foster children were placed with a relative or NREFM. Another data set, found in a report published by *The Imprint* entitled *Who Cares: A National Count of Foster Homes and Families*,¹³ shows that in 2020, 34% of all foster youth in California were living

⁹ https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/

¹⁰ https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/

¹¹ <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/kinship-care-supports-the-academic-performance-of-children>

¹² Webster, D., Lee, S., Dawson, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Putnam-Hornstein, E., Wiegmann, W., Saika, G., Courtney, M., Eastman, A.L., Hammond, I., Gomez, A., Sunaryo, E., Guo, S., Agarwal, A., Berwick, H., Hoerl, C., Yee, H., Gonzalez, A., Ensele, P., Nevin, J., & Guinan, B. (2023). <https://ccwip.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/reports/Allegation/MTSG/r/ab636/s>

¹³ The Imprint, *Who Cares: A National Count of Foster Homes and Families*, (2022), <https://www.fostercarecapacity.com/>.

with relatives. The CCWIP also provides point-in-time data on foster care placements by County.¹⁴

CHANGES IN PRACTICES WITHIN EXISTING RESOURCES CAN CHANGE LIVES.

As shown by the recent Sacramento County experience, modest best practice-inspired changes in operations can increase the number of family placements. For example, Los Angeles County implemented the Upfront Family Finding project, first in two offices then more broadly. As explained by a report authored by the Departments of Social Services, Health Care Services, Education, and Developmental Services, simply changing when family finding efforts began paid huge dividends:

In Los Angeles County a model of upfront family finding (UFF) was piloted. The program involved dedicated permanency partner social workers that perform intensive searches and documentation review for potential relatives and NREFMs, interview and engage relatives and age-appropriate children, provide education and assistance regarding court and licensure processes, and link relatives and children to community-based organizations.¹⁵

Or, as researchers from *Child Trends* described it, prior to the pilot, family finding only got seriously underway once children were placed in care for a long time. Under the pilot, however, family finding began right away:

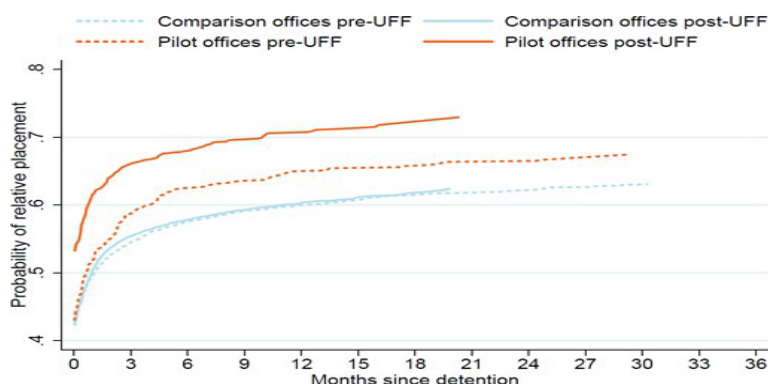
Prior to [] UFF pilot, Los Angeles County's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) focused its family finding efforts on children in care for long periods of time. With the UFF pilot, which started in October 2016, two local offices (Glendora and Santa Fe Springs) conducted family finding when children were first removed from their home, assigning cases to specialized workers who were part of the Permanency Partners Program (P3).

The results of this first phase of the pilot? Big increases in family placements:

¹⁴ Webster, D., Lee, S., Dawson, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Putnam-Hornstein, E., Wiegmann, W., Saika, G., Courtney, M., Eastman, A.L., Hammond, I., Gomez, A., Sunaryo, E., Guo, S., Agarwal, A., Berwick, H., Hoerl, C., Yee, H., Gonzalez, A., Ensele, P., Nevin, J., & Guinan, B. (2023). <https://ccwip.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/reports/Allegation/MTSG/t/ab636/s>

¹⁵ Ibid.

Figure 1. Probability of relative placement over time, Glendora and Santa Fe Springs pre- and post-UFF, all newly detained children



“The UFF pilot program met its goal of increasing relative placements and engaging more relatives to provide support to children. The program led to greater emphasis on identifying relatives for placement and other supports, and the results suggest that children’s likelihood of being placed with relatives increased.”¹⁶

These results were confirmed by *Child Trends* in phase 2:

- “UFF was associated with an increase in the likelihood that a child placed with relatives would be adopted or have a finalized guardianship.”
- “UFF did not adversely affect child safety.”
- “Prioritizing the identification and engagement of relatives at the initial stages of a case encouraged caseworkers to think creatively about how to engage relatives and what types of support relatives can provide to the child. The specialized workers were able to engage relatives and build rapport with families; this progress will serve to strengthen the relationship between local DCFS offices and the communities they serve, benefitting all children and families.”¹⁷

Or, as concluded in the report authored by the aforementioned four Departments:

This [UFF] program resulted in a significant increase in first placement with relatives, increased the number of relatives identified for each child, and led to increased relative connection and involvement with the child.¹⁸

¹⁶ Kate Welti, Alexandria Wilkins, Esther Gross, and Karin Malm Evaluation of Los Angeles County’s Upfront Family Finding Pilot, *Child Trends* (2018) Executive Summary <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/evaluation-of-los-angeles-countys-upfront-family-finding-pilot>

¹⁷ Kate Welti, Alexandria Wilkins, and Karin Malm, Evaluation of Los Angeles County’s Upfront Family Finding Program | Phase 2, *Child Trends* (2021) Executive Summary <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/evaluation-of-los-angeles-countys-upfront-family-finding-program-phase-2>

¹⁸ <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AB-2083-Multiyear-Plan-for-Increasing-Capacity.pdf> at p. 44 (emphasis supplied)

So, what did Los Angeles County do, specifically? Two things, mostly:

1. *Individual county child welfare staff at every level regularly get together and simply talk exclusively about family finding, including their rates of success. “From the onset, at each meeting, offices reported the percentage of children who were being placed into relative care and discussions often centered on how to increase these placement rates. ... Special attention was given to ensuring proper representation of staff in all areas of the family finding process.”*

“This has resulted in a culture change where the inclusion of extended family in the case planning activities is highly valued.”¹⁹

2. *Family finding is front loaded whereby efforts to locate family – including fathers – begins immediately when it looks like a child will be detained out of their home:*

These offices start looking for relatives when a case first comes to the attention of social services. If the office knows a judge is issuing a protective custody warrant, social workers immediately start to canvass for relatives and non-relative-extended-family members (NREFMs) such as family friends, god-parents, and similar close family friends). The office uses a search engine called Family Finding to identify and locate “lost” relatives. They also do a better job of finding “non-offending” fathers, as this identifies both fathers and their extended families as possible placements. After all, fathers provide on average 50% of a child’s relatives.²⁰

The results are astounding with some County offices reporting family placement rates as high as 86%.²¹

The experience in Los Angeles and Sacramento is not unique; it is typical. Laws on the books are not enough. Cultural and institutional emphases are a necessary and reinforcing compliment that inform how laws are implemented. As the Assembly Human Services Committee observed:

One recommendation to improve family placement is to ‘routinely review, aggregate, and disseminate data and evidence about kinship families to fully understand how to continuously support these valued caregivers. It is important to consistently review data to understand what can be changed to better support kinship families.

¹⁹ Quotes are from Los Angeles County Executive Briefing Upfront Family Finding and Engagement Progress Report May 15, 2017, p. 2. (Emphasis added)

²⁰ Edwards, Judge Leon, *Juvenile & Family Court Journal*, Relative Placement: The Best Answer for Our Foster Care System, p. 61.

²¹ Conversation with Ret. Judge Michael Nash, Executive Director, Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection, March 27, 2024.

As the Casey Foundation explains, it is a philosophy that matters: “Prioritizing kinship placements starts with child welfare agencies [establishing a kin-first philosophy](#), underscored in written policies and reflected in all aspects of practice. A kin-first agency makes the child’s first – and hopefully only – placement with kin, prioritizing the licensing of relative caregivers whenever possible.²²

As one county welfare leader from another state explains the culture shift required:

Over the past 20-plus years ... [n]onrelative placements are down over 60 percent, as well. We went from 20 percent of children placed with relatives to now **65 percent** of kids with relatives ...

Honestly, it’s pretty routine for us to get new workers in their 20s who have passed civil service tests, grew up in a middle-class neighborhood and stable environment, and may have never been exposed to the challenges our families face. And they will come on board and say, ‘We’ve got to save these kids from those people. This foster parent can give the child horseback lessons. What can grandma give them except love?’ Of course, we know that love is the most important thing – but they’re a bit naive and so it’s our job to educate them, to really **show them the benefits of making kinship a priority**, and the services and supports that are available to keep kids safe, happy, and healthy with kin.²³

OTHER STATES DO MORE.

States other than California have placed a higher priority on placing children with family. For example, Tennessee requires the approval of a Kinship Exception Request form to before a child is placed in a non-kin home. In New York, if a child is not placed with relatives or kin, there is a secondary review by a person in a supervisory or managerial role to confirm efforts were taken to find an appropriate and available kinship placement.

THE STATE HAS MADE A SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT IN FAMILY FINDING THROUGH THE CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE IN FAMILY FINDING, ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT.

Time is of the essence in seizing the opportunity for counties to operationalize best practices. “The Budget Act of 2022 allocated \$150 million General Fund [] in one-time funding, available for expenditure **through June 30, 2027**” (emphasis added) to establish “the Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support (EFFES) Program ... through the establishment of

²² <https://www.casey.org/adapting-home-studies-for-kin/>

²³ <https://www.casey.org/kin-first-allegheeny/> -- emphasis added

The Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support.”²⁴ “The funded activities shall include any of the following activities described in WIC Section 16546.5(e):

(1) Training of staff on family finding and engagement practices, and models (e.g., Cultural Brokers, Upfront Family Finding, Wendy’s Wonderful Kids) approved by CDSS ...Approved practices and models will be posted on an ongoing basis on the Center for Excellence website and specific tools, resources, trainings, and consultants will be available ...

(2) Staffing and tools to identify, locate, and engage persons related to the child by blood or marriage, identification, and engagement of other family-like relationships, and in the case of an Indian child, to make active efforts to engage with the tribe to determine the child’s extended family members, as defined in WIC section 224.1.1.”²⁵

(3) Outreach and engagement of the child and family team members and all other current and prior service providers, case managers, and other connections to the foster child, to identify and engage possible family and family-like connections.

(4) Plan development and case management for the child, family, and family-like connections to identify and address any barriers to establishing or reestablishing positive, loving, and supportive relationships. ...

(5) Implementation of model programs, strategies, or promising practices identified by the department in consultation with Tribes, CWDA, CPOC, and child and youth advocacy organizations. ...”²⁶

However, there is no requirement they participate in the program ad by its terms in runs out in 2027. While counties are permitted to opt-into the program’s funding with a fifty percent funding match, **but for free a county can access the best practices and related information available through the program, although no county is required to.**²⁷ For example, there are over ten seminars scheduled for 2024.²⁸

AB 562 (SOLACHE AND BRYAN): WHAT IT DOES.

AB 562’s approach to addressing the disparities between counties when it comes to maybe the most important thing we can do for abused or neglected foster children – placing them with their family – is simply to require county decision-makers in counties that are below the statewide average in placing children with family members not to forget about the topic; one

²⁴ CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ALL COUNTY LETTER NO. 23-12, p. 1. The Center can be found here: <https://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/center-for-excellence-family-finding/about>

²⁵ Id, at p.2.

²⁶ Id. at p.3. As of the date of this letter it is unknown to the undersigned how many counties have opted-in.

²⁷ <https://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/center-for-excellence-family-finding/about#log>

²⁸ <https://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/center-for-excellence-family-finding-engagement>

of urgent importance to traumatized children. To this end, the bill merely requires that:

- Each county *once a year* check online (e.g., this site <https://ccwip.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/reports/Allegation/MTSG/r/ab636/s>) to see how their family finding rates compare to the statewide average
- In counties that are below the statewide average in placing foster children with relatives the county welfare director, or their designee, shall communicate with the Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support to identify best practices that may be adopted by the county to improve its average rate of placing children with relatives. Counties shall communicate with the Center at least three more times on a quarterly basis. For purposes of this requirement, communication includes email, video conference, or phone call.

Experts and the experiences in Sacramento and Los Angeles counties instruct that these simple steps ensuring the issue is raised will result in abused or neglected children, wherever they happen to live, having a better chance of living not just with a family, but *their* family. This will particularly benefit California's children and families of color.

A regular conversation about what more can be done to promote placing traumatized children with their family is not too much to require. Youth deserve the dignity of belonging—not just a placement, but family, identity, and connection. Please sign AB 562 (Solache and Bryan).

Sincerely,



ED HOWARD
Senior Counsel, Children's Advocacy Institute



CAROLYN REYES
Executive Director, California Youth Connection