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SB 534 – Foster Youth Reconnection

After exiting the foster care system, many young people face years marked by housing instability, unemployment, and economic hardship. In response to this, any former foster youth seek the option to reconnect with their birth parents or extended family to seek support. California law requires counties to provide youth aging out of foster care with essential information, including identification, proof of citizenship, and guidance on housing and employment. However, even when counties possess contact information for birth parents or extended family, there is no requirement to share this, even if the youth requests it. Because many foster youth do not maintain consistent contact with their birth families, they often leave the system without the information needed to reconnect later.

Reconnection is often motivated by a desire to better understand one's identity, family history, and sense of self. Studies have found that many foster youth have said they wish they got more information from their caseworkers related to their birth family or family history before they exited care¹. Research shows that maintaining or reestablishing these relationships has a critical role in young people's stability, identity, and long-term wellbeing.

Family connections also provide critical support during a period when former foster youth are particularly vulnerable. Studies have found that living with a birth parent is associated with a lower risk of arrest in adulthood, reduced risk of homelessness, better mental health, and higher life satisfaction in young adulthood². Despite these benefits, many former foster youth lack lasting relationships altogether. A study of former foster youth in California found that fewer than half reported having a long-term relationship with anyone, with even lower rates among Black and Native American youth, highlighting persistent racial and cultural disparities³.

This bill addresses this issue by requiring counties to provide foster youth, before they turn 18 and at every regularly scheduled review hearing thereafter, with the last known whereabouts and contact information for their parents and siblings, including phone numbers, physical addresses, email addresses, and known social media accounts. Youth retain full autonomy and may decline to receive this information if they choose. By ensuring access to family contact information, this bill promotes informed choice, strengthens family connections, and supports better long-term outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care.

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¹ Courtney, M.E., et al. "Foster Youth Transition to Adulthood: A Longitudinal View of Youth Leaving Care," *Child Welfare*, 80(6) (2001)

² Evans, R et al., "Sources and types of Social Supports and Their Associations with Mental health Symptoms and Life Satisfaction among Young Adults with a History of Out-of-Home Care," *Children (Basel)* 9(4), (2022)

³ Okpych, N.J. et al. "Relationships that Persist and Protect: The Role of Enduring Relationships on Early Adult Outcomes Among Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care" *Social Service Review* 97(4) (2023)

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