**Campaign # 1: Creating a child-centered, family-first child welfare system by ensuring children are supported in family placements immediately and have access to full funding and services**

**Background:** Continuum of Care Reform (CCR), a set of laws that took effect in 2017, is intended to support children in family settings and limit the use of congregate care (group homes). Group homes as we have known them will no longer exist. Short Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs) will be available as short-term interventions for youth with identified mental health needs. However, STRTPs are not meant to serve as a long-term placement or a solution for a shortage of family homes.

As CCR mandates that children only be placed in families, we must support families immediately upon placement to achieve the vision of CCR. Caregivers who step up to take in a child on an emergency basis before being approved through the Resource Family Approval (RFA) process are going six or more months with no support and services. This issue affects relatives and non-related extended family members in particular, as they are more likely to be contacted at the time that a child is detained and needs emergency placement, and less likely to have already sought RFA approval.

The Alliance for Children’s Rights’ advocacy is focused on:

* + - * Education to help agencies, legislators and other stakeholders remember that ALL kids in the child welfare system have sustained trauma and therefore require supports to help them recover;
      * Policies and practices to support kids and families immediately at time of placement;
      * Preventing the immediate cost of stabilizing services from becoming a deterrent to supporting families, as up-front investment in a child in a family placement reduces the long-term costs of instability, including the expenses of more intensive services, homelessness, incarceration, major health crises, and other costly outcomes, and;
      * Overcoming delays and confusion around the RFA process, to ensure that the intentions of CCR are not undermined by delaying stabilizing supports for children that can help them thrive in a family setting.

**ACR Policy Statement**: The Alliance for Children’s Rights supports a comprehensive solution that ensures funding at the time of a child’s placement; reduces barriers to approval by requiring RFA to be completed in 90 days; allows families licensed prior to implementation of RFA to be grandfathered into RFA approval, and clarifying parts of the law that would ensure a child’s best chance at permanency in a loving home.

**ACR 2018 State and Local Policy Action: The Alliance is:**

* Co-sponsoring AB 2183 (Rubio), which will secure critical funding for individuals who accept foster children into their care prior to completing the RFA process;
* Co-sponsoring SB 1083 (Mitchell), which seeks to strengthen the intent of the CCR by addressing implementation hurdles in the RFA process causing delays and difficulties in the recruitment and retention of caregivers and to the timely completion of the family approval process;
* Working with County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) and California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to improve RFA policies through regulatory actions including All County Letters (ACLs), All County Information Notices (ACINs), and revisions to CDSS written directives, and
* Facilitating the Los Angeles CCR Steering Committee and working with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Probation Department to implement effectively RFA policies and improve practices.

**Campaign #2: Ensuring educational equity for foster youth through consistent application of specialized general education rights; decreasing the number of school changes for foster youth; and promoting placement stability**

**Background:** In California, students have had the right to stay in their school of origin since 2004. In recent years, the federal government recognized the importance of school of origin rights, codifying them nationally as part of Every Student Succeeds Act, and adding the right to transportation to make continued attendance at a student’s school of origin possible. California identifies foster youth as one of three “at risk” sub-groups under the Local Control Funding Formula, recognizing their educational needs, and schools now are held accountable for the specific outcomes and achievement gaps experienced by foster youth. Nevertheless, California foster youth continue to change schools an average of eight times while they are in care, losing four to six months of their educational progress with each move. This, along with inconsistent application of their other general education rights, means that foster youth consistently demonstrate the poorest outcomes of any student group.

The Alliance for Children’s Rights calls for these changes:

* Child welfare organizations should comply with the federal mandate to take school stability into account when making foster care placement decisions, and should embrace technology improvements that facilitate this;
* Develop a default rule as to which entity must arrange for a pay for transportation for a foster youth to his or her school of origin;
* Redouble efforts to recruit and retain stable foster family homes, including relatives, to avoid the placement instability that results in school instability, and provide adequate financial, medical, and behavioral support for vulnerable children and their caregivers to aid placement stability, and
* Focus on educational achievement gap for foster youth to raise awareness of the need for policies that improve school achievement.

**ACR Policy Statement**: The Alliance for Children’s Rights supports the development of laws that promote the education of foster youth, including ensuring that foster youth maintain their right to remain at their school of origin and requiring state minimum graduation and partial credit laws to be applied equally to all foster, probation, and homeless youth attending any public school, including charter and juvenile court schools.

**ACR 2018 State and Local Policy Action:** The Alliance is:

* Supporting AB 2121 (Caballero), which requires charter schools to comply with existing statutory requirements supporting educational outcomes for highly mobile student populations including foster youth;
* Supporting AB 2691 (Jones-Sawyer), which establishes the Trauma-Informed Schools Initiative within the California Department of Education (CDE) to address the impact of adverse childhood experiences on the educational outcomes of California pupils;
* Leading a California Collaborative for Educational Excellence professional learning network of six school districts in development and implementation of policies that are legally compliant, practical, and applied consistently at the local level;
* Partnering with key education, welfare, and dependency organizations throughout the state to train school districts on legal standards and best practices described in the ACR Foster Youth Education Toolkit, and providing additional training with a Court Companion for those in the court system;
* Engaging with Los Angeles county, agency, court, and district partners to help develop a comprehensive school of origin transportation plan that suits the diverse needs of the largest county in the state, and
* Working at the local and state levels to determine key factors for tracking foster youth in our education system; developing tools for making accurate tracking possible; encouraging statewide aggregation of the data; and sharing the data and its significance widely to develop a broad coalition of those committed to improving the foster youth achievement gap.

**Campaign #3: Ensuring that all youth who elect to participate in extended foster care are appropriately and safely housed**

**Background:** Current law allows any youth who was in a foster care placement on his or her 18th birthday to remain in foster care, at his or her option, until the age of 21. All youth in foster care have a right to a safe and appropriate housing. Despite this right, many young adults between the ages of 18 and 21 do not have a stable, appropriate place to live where they can benefit from the advantages of extended foster care. The right to participate in extended foster care has not resulted in the creation of enough supported housing to meet the need. Advocates for youth must partner with county agencies and the state to enforce a foster youth’s right to housing and to overcome the barriers that are leading to housing instability and inadequate housing stock available to this population.

**Alliance for Children’s Rights Policy Statement:**

The Alliance for Children’s Rights believes that all youth who are eligible for extended foster care are legally entitled to safe and appropriate housing. Advocates for youth must enforce the rights of youth eligible for extended foster care benefits through AB 12 (Chapter 559, Statutes of 2010) to housing and overcome barriers leading to housing instability and inadequate stock of housing. We also must raise awareness of and develop solutions to dysfunctions in the foster care system, including delays and errors in the provision of safe housing and financial benefits for non-minor dependents that contribute to homelessness.

**ACR 2018 State and Local Policy Action:** The Alliance is

* Co-sponsoring AB 2337 (Gipson), to remove administrative barriers to ensure that youth in need of transitional services are able to enter or re-enter extended foster care;
* Advocating for amendments to state regulations governing transitional housing for current and former foster youth to increase access to and stability in transitional housing programs;
* Implementing legal strategies to enforce the right to safe and stable housing for non-minor dependents;
* Identifying trends in homelessness and immediate risk of homelessness among those who are or have been in foster care through monitoring of our clients’ cases;
* Working with Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Los Angeles County Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) to maximize housing options for current and former foster youth;
* Advocating for better understanding of the availability of transitional housing programs to identify needs and gaps in available programs and services. Specifically, we advocate that county agencies better quantify homelessness among key client populations, including those who:
* are eligible for extended foster care benefits but are not currently receiving benefits,
* are in extended foster care and are homeless,
* are in extended foster care and are an imminent risk of homelessness (such as those in emergency shelters or facing eviction proceedings), and
* have exited out of extended foster care and are homeless, and
* Asserting due process rights of non-minor dependents facing eviction from transitional housing.

**Campaign #4: Improving timely filing of SSI applications and appeals practices, so that youth with disabilities age out of foster care with the support afforded by SSI**

**Background:** Currently, county child welfare agencies are obligated to file Supplemental Security Income (SSI) applications on behalf of transition-age foster youth with disabilities to ensure that these young people, who are not able to support themselves due to those disabilities, have the support they need when they age out of foster care. However, we see in our casework instances of youth who likely qualify for SSI for whom no timely application has been filed, and cases in which youth or their caregivers have been forced to shoulder the responsibility of completing and filing applications. As a result of these violations, many youth with disabilities age out of foster care without a financial safety net, vulnerable to exploitation, homelessness, incarceration, and other adverse outcomes.

**Alliance for Children’s Rights Policy Statement:** The Alliance is prioritizing enforcement of county obligations around timely SSI applications for eligible youth. Specifically, we are:

* Training partners, including social workers, Foster Family Agencies (FFAs), the court, and those who work with caregivers, around how and when to pursue SSI, who is responsible for doing so, and how to use existing resources to submit a high-quality application;
* Educating policymakers about the obligation to file timely SSI applications on behalf of youth with disabilities, and to support youth through SSI appeals, and
* Advocating for youth with disabilities by enforcing their right to a timely SSI application and representing those youth in appeals.

**ACR 2018 State and Local Policy Action:** The Alliance is:

* Advising local agencies on policies, training, and implementation to ensure compliance with legal responsibilities to youth with disabilities, and
* Supporting leveraging of existing resources to improve the quality of SSI applications filed on behalf of foster youth with disabilities.