



California Foster Care Ombudsman Office

Annual Report

May 2003 – May 2004

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CALIFORNIA FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN ANNUAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth annual report issued by the California Foster Care Ombudsman. The Foster Care Ombudsman was established by Senate Bill (SB) 933 (Chapter 311, Statutes of 1998) and the program began providing services on May 2, 2000, to give foster children and youth or citizens with a forum for voicing their concerns regarding the care, placement and services of children and youth in foster care.

The Foster Care Ombudsman is an autonomous office located within the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and acts as an independent forum for the review and resolution of complaints regarding foster care services.

The foster care system provides a necessary service in caring for the children removed from abusive or neglectful homes. As of January 1, 2004, there were 84,500 children in the California foster care system. More than half of these children were receiving permanent placement services. The caregivers who have dedicated their careers or opened their homes to help abused and neglected children entrusted to California's child welfare system provide an invaluable service. The California Foster Care Ombudsman received 1,053 complaints during this reporting period, which reflect a small percentage in relationship to the number of children in care.

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the California Foster Care Ombudsman Office is to provide a voice to speak and act on behalf of foster children and youth regarding their care, placement and services.

The word "Ombudsman" derives from a Swedish term indicating a person who acts on behalf of another. The American Bar Association has further defined an Ombudsman as "an independent governmental official who receives complaints against the government (and government related agencies) and/or its officials from aggrieved persons, who investigates, and who, if the complaints are justified, makes recommendations to remedy the complaints.

PROGRAM SUMMARY

The California Foster Care Ombudsman provides the following services:

- ❖ Maintains a statewide toll-free Foster Care Help-Line (1-877-846-1602).
- ❖ Conducts objective investigations and attempts to resolve complaints made by or on behalf of children or youth placed in foster care, related to their care, placement or services.
- ❖ Disseminates information to children and youth in foster care, and professionals regarding services of the Foster Care Ombudsman Office and foster youth rights.
- ❖ Compiles all data collected on a yearly basis and makes that information available to the Legislature.

THE COMPLAINT AND INQUIRY PROCESS

The Foster Care Ombudsman has created protocols and procedures for processing complaints and inquiries. The following processes are used by the Foster Care Ombudsman staff to assist callers in resolving their concerns and issues:

- ❖ All contacts are documented in a complaint database.
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman determines the priority status of the complaint. If the complaint involves an allegation of abuse, a report is made to Child Protective Services (CPS) and Community Care Licensing (CCL), if applicable.
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman acts as an objective fact-finder.
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman will inquire if the complainant feels safe making a complaint and if there is any fear of retaliation, and will explore various approaches to address the concerns.
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman determines if the complainant has addressed the concerns to other personnel or organizations (i.e., county social worker, probation officer, county ombudsman, CCL, etc.).
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman contacts all relevant parties, either by phone or in person, (including the complainant, family members, social worker, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), county ombudsman, attorney, physicians and any others).
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman determines if a referral needs to be made to appropriate agencies or organizations for supportive services.
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman reports back to all complainants as to the action taken by the Foster Care Ombudsman and the status of the resolution.

AUTHORITY AND LIMITATIONS OF THE CALIFORNIA FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN

The authority of the program includes:

- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman may meet or communicate with any foster child in his or her placement or elsewhere;
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman can have access to any record of a State or local agency that is necessary to carry out its responsibilities;
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman can investigate any and all complaints received by the Office;
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman is empowered to investigate the acts of State and local administrative agencies and to recommend appropriate changes toward safe-guarding children's rights; and
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman has the responsibility to report all findings to the CDSS and the Legislature.

The authority of the program is *limited* as follows:

- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman does not have the authority to challenge court decisions;
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman can recommend case reassessments but is not empowered to change case plans; and
- ❖ The Foster Care Ombudsman does not have authority regarding personnel issues. Complaints regarding discrimination and other personnel actions shall be referred to the appropriate office.

CALIFORNIA FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN STAFF

Karen Grace-Kaho is the California Ombudsman for Foster Care. The Foster Care Ombudsman Office has a total of 11 staff, which includes former foster youth. The program also utilizes volunteers as a part of the staff. Each staff person brings a wide array of educational and professional experience, a wealth of knowledge, personal talent and commitment, which assists them in meeting the needs of the Foster Care Ombudsman. The high level of dedication of the Foster Care Ombudsman staff is the basis for the excellent service provided to current and former foster youth throughout California.

ANNUAL DATA SUMMARY

Total Contacts – 2,723

From May 2003 – May 2004, a total of 2,723 contacts were made to the Foster Care Ombudsman. This includes:

- ❖ Complaints
- ❖ Requests for information and materials
- ❖ Requests for outreach presentations
- ❖ Referrals
- ❖ Other calls, consultations and case conferences

Complaints – 1,053

The Foster Care Ombudsman received 1,053 complaints made by or on behalf of children and youth placed in foster care during this reporting period. Complaints are received from a broad range of people interested in children and youth in foster care, including actual youth who are in foster care, parents, providers, grandparents and other relatives.

Actions Taken

Investigations – 1053

In these cases, Foster Care Ombudsman staff conducted fact-finding, data collection, consultation and interviews with various parties to explore options and intervene to resolve complainants' concerns.

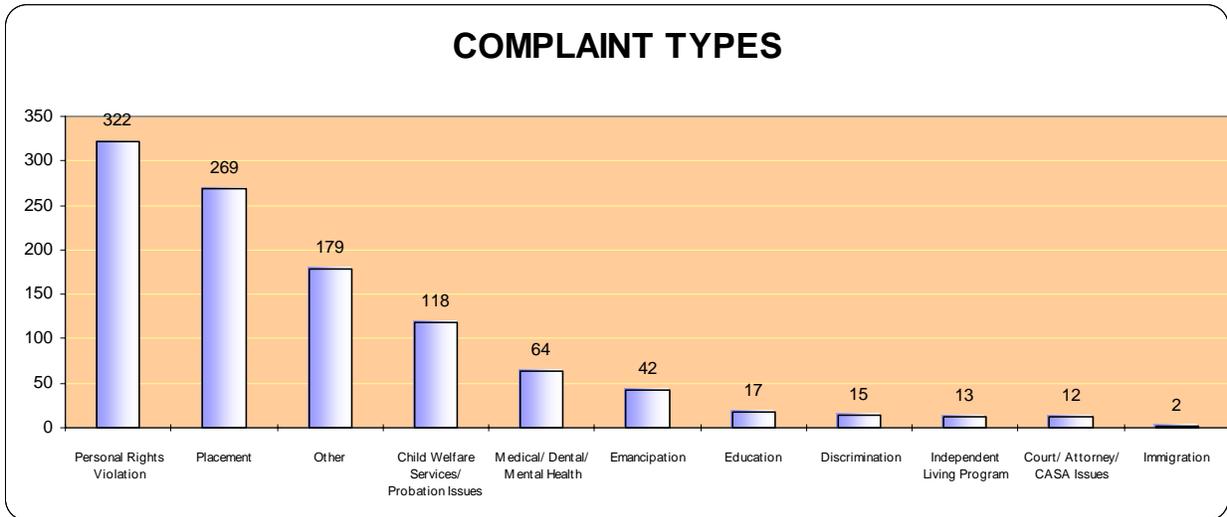
Closed Cases - 842

A case is closed after the complainant's concerns have been addressed and/or resolved.

Active Cases – 211

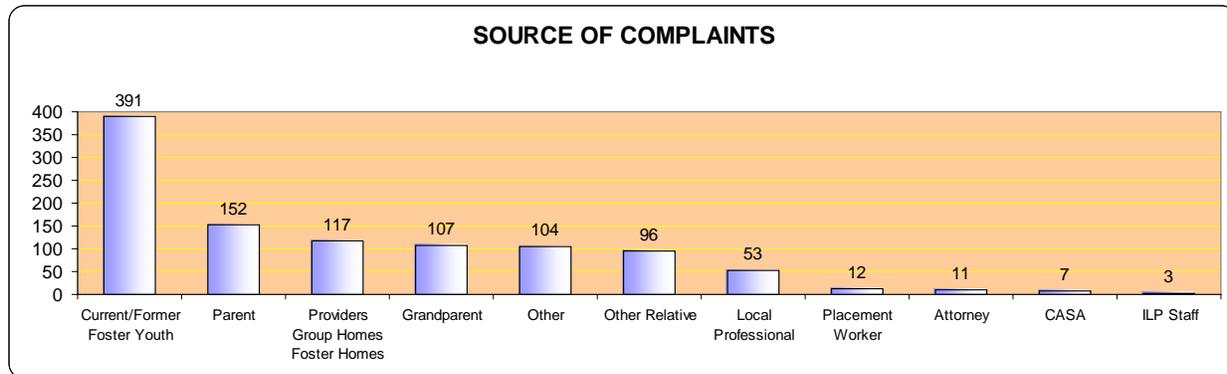
These are cases that remain open until the complainant's concerns are addressed or resolved.

The Foster Care Ombudsman Office receives a wide array of complaints. During this reporting period, the highest numbers of complaints were in the categories of personal rights violations and placement issues. The following chart depicts a breakdown of all complaint issues received by the Foster Care Ombudsman by type including, child welfare services/probation, medical/dental/mental health, emancipation education, discrimination, Independent Living Program (ILP), court/attorney/CASA and immigration issues.



The following chart shows the various categories of complaints to the Foster Care Ombudsman and illustrates that the highest source of complaints during this reporting period are from:

1. Current or former foster youth (391)
2. Biological parents (152)
3. Care Providers (117)
4. Grandparents (107)



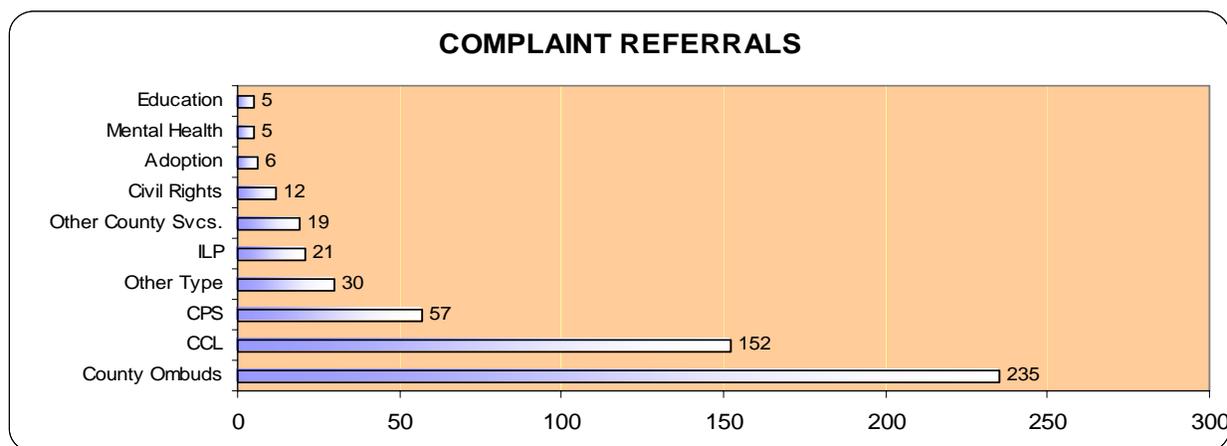
Personal rights violations continue to be the highest category of complaints received by the Foster Care Ombudsman.

During this reporting period, the Foster Care Ombudsman received a total of 322 complaints regarding personal rights violations.

The chart below specifies the personal rights complaints.

FOSTER YOUTH PERSONAL RIGHTS CATEGORY	NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS
Free from abuse and neglect in placement	113
Live in a safe environment / treated with respect	55
Contact family members, placement worker, CASA, attorney	35
Other	22
Receive adequate food and clothing	18
Free from unreasonable searches of personal belongings	15
Attend religious services	12
Telephone calls and mail	12
Attend court hearings and speak to judge	8
Contact with siblings	8
Receive medical, dental, vision and mental health services	5
Not be locked in any room	4
Attend school and participate in other activities	3
Have social contacts	3
Receive an allowance	3
Attend ILP classes	2
Contact with CCL or Ombudsman Office	2
Have storage space	1
Confidential juvenile court records	1
TOTAL	322

In addition to resolving specific complaints, the Foster Care Ombudsman provides referrals to other agencies and departments to ensure that foster youth receive appropriate services. The Foster Care Ombudsman made 571 referrals for services during this reporting period, of which 235 were referred to local county ombudsman offices.



Informational Calls – 820

A total of 820 calls requesting information were received by the Foster Care Ombudsman. All callers are provided with the appropriate information and referrals to other agencies. The Foster Care Ombudsman provides the highest level of customer service possible.

Requests for Materials – 279

During this reporting period, the Foster Care Ombudsman received 279 calls requesting information. A total of 31,249 informational resources have been distributed, including 17,365 posters and 7,503 brochures. All foster homes and group homes in California who are licensed to care for six or more children received a copy of the foster youth rights poster and are required by law to post it in their facilities.

Outreach Presentations - 48

The Foster Care Ombudsman Office conducts numerous outreach activities to provide information on the rights of youth in out-of-home care and to educate the community about the foster care system as well as the services provided by the Foster Care Ombudsman. During the fourth year of operation, the Foster Care Ombudsman Office conducted 48 presentations to the following groups and organizations:

- CASA`
- Community Care Licensing
- Community Colleges
- Court/Attorneys
- Department of Education
- Foster Family Agency
- Foster Parent Association
- Independent Living Programs/Foster Youth
- Juvenile Court/Probation Departments
- Public Agencies
- High School Youth
- United States Ombudsman Association
- United Way

The Foster Care Ombudsman continues to provide training on foster youth rights to foster youth organizations, CASA, attorneys, judges, relatives, social workers and other interested community groups.

FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN CASE EXAMPLES

Foster Youth Rights

The largest category of complaints made to the Foster Care Ombudsman were related to alleged violations of foster youth rights. Assembly Bill (AB) 899 (Chapter 683, statutes of 2001) clarifies the rights of foster children and youth. Complainants are advised that the Foster Care Ombudsman staff are mandated reporters of suspected child abuse and thus are required to report all allegations of child abuse and neglect to CPS and CCL. All callers are informed that information shared with the Foster Care Ombudsman may not be confidential.

The following are examples of complaint calls to the Foster Care Ombudsman regarding foster youth rights:

A foster youth living in a group home contacted the Foster Care Ombudsman regarding the right to attend church services of her choice. The group home would not provide her with a ride to go to church. The Foster Care Ombudsman Office contacted the group home and informed the administrator of the youth's right to attend church services. The group home assigned a staff person to provide a ride for the youth.

Several youth from a group home contacted the Foster Care Ombudsman Office reporting that they had attended a foster youth independent living event where the group home staff were also present. The staff felt that the youth had behaved inappropriately and proceeded to search them in a public setting. Foster Care Ombudsman reported the incident to CCL which investigated the allegation and substantiated the complaint. The group home staff participated in foster youth rights training to help them better understand proper search procedures.

An older foster youth contacted the Foster Care Ombudsman from school because she felt that she was being emotionally abused in the foster family home that she was placed in. She reported that she was required to wake up at 5:00 a.m. in the morning and tend to various animals and perform several chores before going to school. The youth complained that the foster parents kept their dogs in her bedroom during the day. She also reported that the foster parents would call her derogatory names and that she was not allowed to use the phone to contact her social worker, her attorney or the Foster Care Ombudsman. The Foster Care Ombudsman reported the complaint to CCL who conducted an investigation. The allegations were substantiated. The foster care license of the home was revoked and the youth was moved to another placement.

Placement

Complaints regarding the placement of foster youth/children were the second highest category during this reporting period. Many of the calls to the Foster Care Ombudsman were from parents, grandparents and other relatives wanting to have the foster child/youth placed with a relative. Here are three examples:

A grandmother living out of state called the Foster Care Ombudsman requesting assistance with placement of her grandchild, a baby, with her. The Welfare & Institutions Code section 319 (f) gives priority placement to relatives, however, the county was reluctant to place the baby out of state. The Foster Care Ombudsman Office contacted the county regarding the grandmother's request. A home study was conducted by the state of residence for the grandmother's home at the request of the Foster Care Ombudsman. In working cooperatively with the county staff, the grandmother and the other state, placement of the child with the grandparents was achieved.

A youth who had run away from the group home where she had been placed called the Foster Care Ombudsman Office. The group home she was placed in was in a different county from where she had lived. She wanted to be placed with or near her family back in the county she was from. The Foster Care Ombudsman contacted the youth's social worker who did not know the youth's whereabouts and was very concerned about the youth's well being. The youth would not reveal her whereabouts and the social worker would not agree to place the youth back in the original county or with family. The Foster Care Ombudsman Office worked as a liaison between the youth, the county social worker and the youth's family until an agreement was reached to place the youth back in the county with a family member.

An aunt and uncle contacted our office reporting that their nieces and nephews had just been placed in foster care by CPS and that there were family members who wanted to have children placed in their care. According to the family, the county social worker didn't seem interested in placing any of the children in their home. Our office contacted the county and had a tele-conference with the program manager, social worker supervisor, and the case manager and the county agreed to set up a family conference. At the family conference, the county and the family agreed to have two of the uncles assessed for placement. All seven nieces and nephews have been placed with family members and the mother is working hard on her case plan to have her children returned to her custody.

Placement Agency Relationships

The third highest category of complaints to the Foster Care Ombudsman related to placement agency issues. Many of the concerns specifically related to the complainant's relationship with the placement worker.

The following are examples of placement agency relationship complaints received by the Foster Care Ombudsman:

A foster youth contacted the Foster Care Ombudsman because he was having difficulty contacting his social worker. He had left many messages but had not received a response. The Foster Care Ombudsman Office was able to make contact with the social worker after several attempts and conveyed the message that the youth needed to speak with her. The social worker then contacted the youth.

A maternal aunt contacted our office reporting that the county social worker was not returning her calls regarding her seven nieces and nephews who were placed in foster care. Our office contacted the social worker, who said that because of a family members alleged criminal history, they would not consider a relative placement. The maternal aunt was able to show the county that there were no criminal charges, and that the allegation was false. Two of the children were placed with the maternal aunt. The social worker has been working very closely with the family and the children have been thriving in this placement.

The Foster Care Ombudsman was contacted by a former foster parent reporting that a youth was transported to his old neighborhood and dropped off on a street corner after his emancipation hearing. The youth was previously told by his county social worker that if he emancipated on his 18th birthday, the county would provide him with transitional housing services and other services, depending on his needs. The youth had no money, no food, or lodging and was left to fend for himself. When the youth asked his social worker about the transitional housing, the social worker told him that since he didn't want to be in foster care system anymore, he was on his own. The Foster Care Ombudsman staff contacted the county who confirmed that the youth had been dropped off. After being contacted by the Ombudsman Office, county staff assisted the youth in obtaining services and housing.

Medical/Dental/Mental Health Services

Foster youth and children are in critical need of appropriate medical, dental, and mental health services and treatment and to be placed in settings that can meet their physical and emotional needs.

Many callers identified concerns regarding the need for necessary medical, dental and mental health treatment. Some examples:

An anonymous caller contacted our office and reported that a youth who recently emancipated and is currently attending college out of state was told that his Medi-Cal card had expired. The youth is a diabetic and depends on his Medi-Cal for his insulin. He is keeping his California residency and paying out of state tuition to the college. The Foster Care Ombudsman Office immediately contacted the youths' former county social worker and the eligibility worker to let them know his Medi-Cal card had expired and that he only had enough insulin for seven more days. The eligibility worker expedited the paperwork. The Medi-Cal card was reinstated in less than 48 hours and the youth was able to fill his prescription before his insulin ran out.

A youth who was placed in a group home attended a presentation and filled out a complaint form reporting that she hadn't seen a dentist for over 10 months and needed dental work. The youth reported that she had spoken to the group home staff and her probation officer regarding her wisdom teeth that were causing her a lot of pain. The Foster Care Ombudsman contacted the probation officer who then made arrangements for the youth to have her wisdom teeth pulled. The youth was very grateful to the Foster Care Ombudsman for helping her.

A foster youth living in a group home called the Foster Care Ombudsman Office to report that her prescription had not been refilled by the group home. She had not received medication for three days. The Foster Care Ombudsman staff contacted the group home who had inadvertently overlooked the refill. The prescription was filled and the youth received her medication.

Emancipation Services/Independent Living Program/ Homelessness

The ILP is state and federally funded to provide resources and services to foster youth age 16 and older to enable them to learn the skills needed to successfully emancipate from the system. The Foster Care Ombudsman regularly receives calls from youth who are emancipating and seeking information and assistance with finding suitable housing and supportive services. All California counties have an ILP, however, services offered may vary substantially from county to county.

The following are examples of calls to the Foster Care Ombudsman regarding emancipation services and independent living program complaints:

A youth who had emancipated and was homeless and five months pregnant, contacted the Foster Care Ombudsman. The Foster Care Ombudsman contacted the county of jurisdiction and the ILP program coordinator. The ILP program coordinator immediately assigned the case to a worker who found suitable placement for the youth within 48 hours and also transported the youth to the placement.

An emancipated youth called the Foster Care Ombudsman needing a permanent place to live. He was temporarily living with friends but needed to leave. Foster Care Ombudsman staff referred the case to the local county Ombudsman who contacted the county ILP by working collaboratively with the county Ombudsman and ILP suitable housing was found for the youth.

A distraught foster youth called the Foster Care Ombudsman to report that her foster mother had informed her that since she had graduated she would have to leave the home. When the youth asked for more time to make living arrangements, the foster parent informed her that she was under a seven day notice to leave and that was her last day. The youth's belongings had already been placed outside and she was told that she would have to leave the next morning. The youth had not been informed about the seven day notice and she had no where to go. The Foster Care Ombudsman contacted the youth's social worker and began working collaboratively to find placement for the youth. The youth was moved to another placement and she began receiving Independent Living and Emancipation services.

Education

The transitory nature of foster care creates many educational barriers for foster youth. Educational issues are problematic and complex.

The following are examples of complaint calls to the Foster Care Ombudsman regarding education:

A youth contacted the Foster Care Ombudsman because he wanted to attend school close to his foster home. He was attending a school outside of the city he resided in. The Foster Care Ombudsman contacted the youth's attorney and county social worker. The youth was able to transfer to the local school nearer to his home. He was much more comfortable in his new environment.

A county social worker contacted the Foster Care Ombudsman regarding a disabled youth who needed special educational services. The youth, who was no longer under the dependency of the court, was living with a relative. The county was having difficulty accessing special educational services from the local school district. The youth was eligible for services but did not have the necessary forms she needed from the local school district. The school district had been unresponsive. The Foster Care Ombudsman contacted the school district. The school district staff stated that the problem was that the caretaker had not submitted documents in a timely manner. The Foster Care Ombudsman Office worked with the school district and the youth's social worker to ensure that the necessary paperwork was submitted.

A group home staff contacted the Foster Care Ombudsman regarding a youth who had been placed in their group home for two months and was not yet enrolled in school. He was unable to get the youth enrolled in school because his transcripts had not followed him from his last high school. The Foster Care Ombudsman staff contacted the California Department of Education (CDE). The CDE worked with the county department of education liaison for foster children to resolve the issue with the high school. As a result, the youth was enrolled at the local high school in less than 24 hours.

Court/Attorney Issues

All children and youth in the foster care system are entitled to legal representation by counsel (except as delineated by law). Youth are also entitled to attend their court hearings and receive copies of their court reports.

The following are examples of complaint calls to the Foster Care Ombudsman regarding court and/or attorney issues:

A youth who attended a Foster Care Ombudsman presentation filled out a complaint form reporting that he had not been allowed to attend his court hearings. The Foster Care Ombudsman contacted his social worker and his attorney. The youth was able to attend the next court hearing and have input on his case.

An 18-year-old youth still in foster care called the Foster Care Ombudsman because her social worker had told her that she was responsible for getting to court on her own. The youth did not have transportation and did not know the routes, if any, for public transportation. The Foster Care Ombudsman contacted the youth's social worker and her attorney to discuss the youth's need for assistance in getting to court. Both the social worker and the attorney agreed to ensure that transportation would be provided to the youth.

A 17-year-old foster youth and a 16-year-old foster youth, both placed in the same foster home called the Foster Care Ombudsman to complain that their new social worker was going to move them to other homes because the social worker did not get along with the foster parent. The reasons for moving the youth from the home that the social worker had reported to the court were that the foster home was across the street from a park which was a haven for drug dealers and that the youth were not being supervised. The youth stated that these allegations were not true. The youth got along well with the foster parent; they were happy in this foster home and wanted to stay there. The 17-year-old youth had been trying to contact his attorney but the attorney had not returned his call. The Foster Care Ombudsman staff placed several calls to the attorney but received no response. Subsequently the Foster Care Ombudsman staff contacted the attorney's supervisor who had filed a petition to have the youth removed based on the social worker's report. After speaking with Foster Care Ombudsman staff, the supervisor conducted an investigation of her own and discovered that the allegations were not true. The home was a lovely home and the park was not a haven for drug dealers. The court ruled that the youth were not to be moved.



CALIFORNA FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN

SPECIAL PROJECTS

The Foster Care Ombudsman is involved in a number of projects that promote happy, healthy lives for foster children and youth and lead to more productive outcomes for youth who emancipate from foster care. This includes the following special projects:

- ❖ Foster Youth Rights
- ❖ Foster Youth Employment, Training and Housing Taskforce
- ❖ Permanency for Older Foster Youth
- ❖ Education for Foster Children and Youth
- ❖ Foster Care Ombudsman Advisory Committee
- ❖ On-going Activities:

Foster Care Ombudsman Outreach
Foster Care Ombudsman Website
Foster Care Ombudsman Database

FOSTER YOUTH RIGHTS

The Foster Care Ombudsman provides training sessions and distributes information regarding foster youth rights. The rights of children and youth in foster care were established by AB 899 (Chapter 683 statutes of 2001). Additional non-discrimination rights were added by AB 458 (Chapter 331, statutes of 2003). The Foster Care Non-Discrimination Act prohibits discrimination in the foster care system on the basis of actual or perceived race, ethnic group identification, ancestry, national origin, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identify, mental or physical disability, or HIV status.

These rights are to be communicated to the foster children and youth in three ways: 1) Facilities licensed to care for six or more foster children are required to post information on foster youth rights in their facility; 2) placement workers and caregivers are required to provide a foster youth rights orientation to each school age foster child; and 3) social workers are required to remind youth of their rights at least every six months.

All children in foster care shall have the following rights:

- ❖ To live in a safe, healthy, and comfortable home where he or she is treated with respect.
- ❖ To be free from physical, sexual, emotional, or other abuse, or corporal punishment.
- ❖ To receive adequate and healthy food, adequate clothing, and for youth in group homes, an allowance.
- ❖ To receive medical, dental, vision, and mental health services.
- ❖ To be free of the administration of medication or chemical substances, unless authorized by a physician.
- ❖ To contact family members, unless prohibited by court order, and social workers, attorneys, foster youth advocates and supporters, CASA, and probation officers.
- ❖ To visit and contact brothers and sisters, unless prohibited by court order.
- ❖ To contact the CDSS Community Care Licensing Division or the California Foster Care Ombudsman regarding violations of rights, to speak to representatives of these offices confidentially, and to be free from threats or punishment for making complaints.
- ❖ To make and receive confidential telephone calls and send and receive unopened mail, unless prohibited by court orders.

Foster Youth Rights (continued)

- ❖ To attend religious services and activities of his or her choice.
- ❖ To maintain an emancipation bank account and manage personal income consistent with the child's age and developmental level, unless prohibited by the case plan.
- ❖ To not be locked in any room, building or facility premises, unless placed in a community treatment facility.
- ❖ To attend school and participate in extracurricular, cultural and personal enrichment activities consistent with child's age and development level.
- ❖ To work and develop job skills at an age-appropriate level that is consistent with state law.
- ❖ To have social contacts with people outside of the foster care system, such as teachers, church members, mentors and friends.
- ❖ To attend ILP classes and activities if he or she meets age requirements.
- ❖ To attend court hearings and speak to the judge.
- ❖ To have storage space for private use.
- ❖ To review his or her own case plan if he or she is over 12 years of age and to receive information about his or her out-of-home placement and case plan, including being told of changes to the plan.
- ❖ To be free from unreasonable search of personal belongings.
- ❖ To maintain confidentiality of all juvenile court records consistent with existing law.

FOSTER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT, TRAINING AND HOUSING, TASK FORCE

The Foster Youth Employment, Training and Housing (ETH) Taskforce originated from an initiative presented to the Governor's Summit on Homelessness in June of 2002. One of the goals of the summit focused on preventing homelessness among the emancipated foster youth population. The Foster Care Ombudsman facilitates the ETH Taskforce meetings, which is a collaboration between the Employment Development Department (EDD), CDSS, the California Workforce Investment Board (CalWIB) and various other agencies and community organizations.

The ETH Taskforce has contributed to a number of changes that are benefiting foster youth in their efforts to obtain employment, training and housing. This Taskforce was instrumental in changing the Independent Living Skills regulations to address issues of employment and training. The regulations mandate that every foster youth have a Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP) which should assist the youth in obtaining gainful employment through the provision of information about and participation in employment and training services, career exploration, work readiness skills, vocational training, employment expertise, job placement and retention assistance provided at the EDD One-Stop Centers.

Additional accomplishments that have resulted from this taskforce include the development of a training module for foster youth care providers, social workers, and One-Stop Center staff, and the creation of a web site that assists foster youth living in rural areas with information on employment and emancipation services.

In addition, three county pilot projects (Alameda, Ventura, and the Northern Consortium Counties) have resulted in the initiation of coordinated employment, training and housing services between CDSS, EDD and the WIB for foster youth in these counties.

Additional accomplishments of the ETH Taskforce are:

- ❖ 167 foster youth have obtained employment at above minimum wage (\$7.00 - \$12.00 per hour)
- ❖ 11 foster youth received their high school diploma
- ❖ Eight foster youth completed their Certified Nursing School (CAN), three are currently employed at nursing homes.
- ❖ Four youth received assistance for their driver's license classes and exam
- ❖ One foster youth has started a fashion design business

The ETH Taskforce was instrumental in the development of a pilot project with the State Building and Construction Trades Council which enrolled ten youth in training apprenticeship programs. Of those ten, two are now employed with construction laborer unions as apprentices. Three youth were provided temporary housing while in the skills trade training.

The sharing of information by these county pilot projects has initiated the creation of new services in other counties.

Foster Youth ETH Taskforce Participating Organizations

- * Advocates for Young Adults (AYA)
- * Alameda County Workforce Investment Board
- * American Red Cross
- * Americorps
- * Asian Resources
- * California Coalition for Youth (CCY)
- * California Conservation Corps (CCC)
- * California Community College Commission Chancellor's Office
- * California Community College Foundation
- * California Department of Education Foster Youth Services
- * California Department of Mental Health
- * California Job Prospects
- * California One-Stop Career Centers
- * California Student Aid Commission
- * CDSS CalWORKS
- * California Youth Connection (CYC)
- * Casey Family Programs
Casey Great Start Program
- * San Pasqual Program San Diego Youth Empowerment Services (YES)
- * Colusa County Workforce Investment Agency
- * Child Welfare League of America
- * Emancipated Youth/Bay Area Works
- * Generations Together
- * Glenn County Human Resource Agency
- * Go Serve
- * Greater Sacramento Urban League
- * Honoring Emancipated Youth
- * Housing & Urban Development
- * CDSS Independent Living Program
- * Job Corps
- * Job Training Program
- * National Center for Youth Law
- * Northern Valley Catholic Social Services
- * Office of Emergency Services – Criminal Justice Programs Division
- * Pivotal Point Youth Services
- * Pride Industries
- * Regional Occupational Programs
- * Sacramento Employment and Training Agency (SETA)
- * San Juan Unified School District
- * Successful Transitions for Adult Readiness (STAR)
- * State Building & Construction Trades Council (Apprentice Programs)
- * Tutor Connection
- * U.S. Department of Labor
- * Workability
- * Yolo County Department of Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Services

PERMANENCY FOR OLDER FOSTER YOUTH

Until recently, the problem of locating permanent families for older children and youth has received little attention from the general public. Misconceptions about the issue include common myths such as: a) no one wants to adopt or form lifelong commitments with older foster youth; b) older foster youth do not want to be adopted; and c) placements of older foster youth are unsuccessful. These misconceptions are common in social work practices, dependency court practices and are accepted by the general public. Consequently, many youth who age out of the foster care system without the permanent support of family, can experience homelessness, incarceration, physical and sexual abuse and other forms of victimization.

The Foster Care Ombudsman and CDSS have continued to work with numerous community groups who have identified the need for older foster youth to be connected with committed adults and permanent families. The Foster Care Ombudsman believes that adoption should ALWAYS be an option for children and youth in foster care and that no child should emancipate without being connected to a committed relationship with a caring adult who can provide support and assistance for successful transition into adulthood.

This issue was highlighted at the Permanency for Youth Project national convention. The Foster Care Ombudsman serves on the Permanency for Youth Project Taskforce and its advisory board. The Taskforce continues to challenge the child welfare services system to create similar programs to facilitate finding permanent families for older foster youth. The work from this Taskforce has inspired the creation of AB 408 (Chapter 813, Statutes of 2003).

The key provisions of AB 408 include the following:

- ❖ Declares intent that no child be emancipated from the foster care system without a connection to a committed and caring adult and recognizes the need and possibilities for permanency for older kids, not just younger children.
- ❖ Strengthens the right of children ten years of age and older to be notified of and present at their own dependency hearings, to have their voices heard.
- ❖ Improves the quality and “normalcy” of foster care life by establishing a “prudent parent” standard for foster caregivers, empowering them to allow foster youth to participate in age appropriate extracurricular enrichment and social activities.
- ❖ Requires social workers to ask children aged ten and older, placed in group homes, and who have been in the foster care system for six months or longer about relationships they have that are important to them. Allows social workers to make these same inquiries of younger children, as appropriate.
- ❖ Requires social workers to include in currently-required status reports to the court, their efforts to identify and maintain relationships with appropriate individuals who are important to the child, consistent with the child’s best interest.

EDUCATION OF FOSTER CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The quality of educational services received by foster children is another major concern identified by the CDSS and the Foster Care Ombudsman.

New duties and rights related to the education of dependents and wards in foster care are imposed by AB 490 (Chapter 862, Statutes of 2003). The key provisions are as follows:

- ❖ Establishes legislative intent that foster youth are ensured access to the **same opportunities** to meet academic achievement standards to which all students are held, maintain stable school placements, be placed in the least restrictive educational placement and, have access to the same academic resources, services and extracurricular and enrichment activities as all other children. Makes clear that **education and school placement decisions** are to be dictated by the **best interest** of the child.
- ❖ Creates **school stability** for foster children by allowing them to remain in their school of origin for the duration of the school year when their **placement changes** and remaining in the same school is in the child's best interests.
- ❖ Requires county placing agencies to promote educational stability by considering **placement within** the child's school attendance area.
- ❖ Requires Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to designate a staff person as a **foster care education liaison** to ensure proper placement, transfer and enrollment in school for foster youth.
- ❖ Makes LEAs and county social workers or probation officers jointly responsible for the **timely transfer of students** and their **records** when a change of schools occurs.
- ❖ Requires that a **comprehensive public school** be considered as the first **school placement option** for foster youth.
- ❖ Provides that a foster child has the right to remain enrolled in and attend his/her school of origin pending resolution of school placement **disputes**.
- ❖ Allows a foster child to be **immediately enrolled** in school even if all typically required school records, immunizations, or school uniforms are not available.
- ❖ Requires LEAs to deliver the pupil's **education information and records** to the next educational placement within two days of receiving a transfer request from a county placing agency.
- ❖ Requires school districts to calculate and accept **credit for full or partial coursework** satisfactorily completed by the student and earned while attending a public school, juvenile court school or nonpublic, nonsectarian school.
- ❖ Authorizes the **release of educational records** of foster youth to the county placing agency (Welfare and Institutions code Section 16010), case management responsibilities required by the Juvenile Court or law, or to assist with transfer or enrollment of a pupil.
- ❖ Ensures that foster youth will not be penalized for **absences** due to placement changes, court appearances, or related court ordered activities.

CALIFORNIA FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The California Foster Care Ombudsman Advisory Committee continues to assist in clarifying the role of the Foster Care Ombudsman, sharing ideas for effective outreach, and providing feedback to the Foster Care Ombudsman on protocols and procedures, outreach materials, complaint tracking system and other relevant issues.

The Committee is composed of individuals representing children's advocacy organizations, current and former foster youth, and representatives from provider associations. Various departments and associations within the State are also represented:

Alameda County Ombudsman
Alameda County Social Services Agency
Alliance for Children's Rights
California Foster Parent Association
California Special Advocates
California State Association of Counties
California Welfare Directors Association
California Alliance of Child and Family Services
California Court Appointed Special Advocates
California Partnership for Children
California State Association of Counties
California State Foster Parent Association
California Welfare Director Association (CWDA)
California Youth Connection
Casey Family Programs
CDSS - Adoptions
CDSS – Children's Services Operations Bureau
CDSS - CCL Advocacy and Policy Branch
CDSS - Foster Care Branch
CDSS Independent Living Program
CDSS Legal Division
CDSS Welfare Services
Chief Probation Officers of California
Children's Services San Diego
Children's Home Society of California
CWDA Children's Committee
Commission for Children and Families
Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Office
Families United Inc.
Foster Parents of Los Angeles County
Foster Youth Services Safe Schools
Fresno County Department of Social Services
Fresno County Ombudsman
Genesis
Juvenile Dependency Court
Kair In-Home Social Services
Kern County Ombudsman

CALIFORNIA FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Los Angeles County Probation Ombudsman
Los Angeles Children's Services Ombudsman
Los Angeles Superior Court, Juvenile
Legal Services for Children
Local Interagency Network for Children and Family Services
Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services
Los Angeles County Emancipation Ombudsman
Medi-Cal Ombudsman, Department of Mental Health
MilesTone Solutions
Office of the California Youth Authority
Orange County Department of Children and Family Services
Orange County Ombudsman
Positive Grandparenting
Sacramento County Health and Human Services
Sacramento County Office of Education
Sacramento County Ombudsman
San Diego County DSS
San Diego County Office of Education
San Francisco County Ombudsman
San Juan Unified School District
San Luis Obispo County Department of Social Services
San Mateo County Ombudsman
San Mateo County Children and Family Services Division
Santa Clara County Ombudsman,
Santa Clara County Superior Court
Sacramento Employment Training Agency
Sierra Adoption Services
Solano County Child Protection Services Ombudsman
St. Francis Home for Children
The Mentoring Center
Triad Family Services
Youth Law Center

CALIFORNIA FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN ON-GOING ACTIVITIES

Foster Care Ombudsman Outreach

The Foster Care Ombudsman continues to distribute outreach materials including color brochures in English and Spanish, laminated cards about the Foster Care Ombudsman program and a poster and brochure on foster youth rights. These materials are distributed at outreach presentations and mailed out upon request. The materials are used to assist individuals in understanding the services provided by the Foster Care Ombudsman. In addition, as the Foster Care Ombudsman recognizes patterns regarding the types of complaints, fact sheets are created and distributed explaining the issues and addressing specific ways to resolve them.

The Foster Care Ombudsman web site (www.fosteryouthhelp.ca.gov)

The Foster Care Ombudsman continues to maintain a website that provides information on the Foster Care Ombudsman program as well as a wide range of resources to assist foster youth, providers, and the general public. The site includes information on programs such as: career development opportunities, employment and education. In addition, a variety of Foster Care Ombudsman publications (including foster youth rights brochures and posters), forms, other brochures and reports can be accessed. The Foster Care Ombudsman continues to assess the needs of youth in foster care (as well as those who have emancipated) and places that information on the website to address new issues.

Foster Care Ombudsman Data Base

The Foster Care Ombudsman has designed and developed a comprehensive database to track all calls. This tracking system provides a compilation of the number of calls, type of calls, referrals and other data received by the Foster Care Ombudsman (as mandated by WIC Section 16164 (a) (7)).

An important component of the Foster Care Ombudsman program is the promotion of collaborative relationships among various departments and agencies to address issues and concerns. The Foster Care Ombudsman works with the following departments and agencies to address issues and concerns expressed by foster youth and other complainants:

INTERAGENCY AND INTERDEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATIONS

Community And Child Advocacy Groups

These organizations provide important perspectives and feedback on ways the foster care system can be improved:

California Youth Connection (CYC)
Casey Family Programs
Honoring Emancipating Youth (HEY)
Youth Law Center
Court Appointed Special Advocates

Provider Groups

The Foster Care Ombudsman continues to meet with groups that provide care for foster children to gain information regarding their needs and perspectives:

California Alliance of Children and Family Services
California State Foster Parent Assoc.
Grandparent and Kinship Associations

County Ombudsman

The Foster Care Ombudsman works closely with the local county child welfare ombudsman programs in those counties that have an ombudsman program and encourages the creation of child welfare ombudsman programs in counties without one.

*The following counties have child welfare ombudsman programs:
Alameda, Fresno, Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara and Solano.*

County Child Welfare and Juvenile Probation Professionals

The Foster Care Ombudsman has met with representatives from county probation offices, the Juvenile Justice Commission and the county welfare directors to explain the scope of the Foster Care Ombudsman program and to gain information regarding their challenges in meeting the needs of the children and youth in their systems.

Child Welfare Directors Association
Juvenile Justice Commission
California Probation Officers Association

Resource Directory

A comprehensive resource directory has been compiled listing various federal, state and community resources that are available to current and emancipated foster youth. In addition, a youth resource directory and a gay, lesbian, transgender and questioning youth resource directory has been completed. These directories are used by Foster Care Ombudsman staff to assist foster youth in finding appropriate resources and are continually updated.