



ASSEMBLY MEMBER

Mark Stone

DISTRICT 29

CONTACT
MARK

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Governor Signs Stone Bill to Reform Placement Options for Youth in Foster Care

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SACRAMENTO - The Governor has signed legislation by Assemblymember Mark Stone (D-Monterey Bay) that comprehensively reforms placement and treatment options for youth in foster care. Assembly Bill 403, sponsored by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), builds upon years of policy changes to improve outcomes for youth in foster care.

"Children who enter foster care need safe, comfortable, supportive places to stay, whether that is with a relative, a foster family, or a treatment center," said Stone. "Current options for placement, particularly the existing model for group homes, do not always meet these needs. The reforms in this new law will provide youth with the support they need in foster care to return to their families or to find a permanent home if returning to their families is not an option."

Through major reforms to placement processes and options, AB 403 helps ensure that youth in foster care have their day-to-day physical, mental, and emotional needs met; that they have opportunities to grow up in permanent and supportive homes; and that they can grow into self-sufficient, successful adults.

Long-term placement in group homes can be especially problematic because foster youth who live in these settings are more likely than those in family settings to suffer a variety of negative short- and long-term outcomes. Such placements are associated with an increased likelihood of being involved with the juvenile justice system and the adult correctional system, as well as low educational attainment levels. Further, children who leave group home care to return to live with their families are more likely than those who were in placed in family-based care to return to the foster system. In 2014, about 3,000 of the 60,000 foster youth in California were placed in group home settings.

"The goal for all children in care is to live in a stable home where they, their parents, and their caregivers have a voice in defining their needs and placement, and when necessary, specialized trauma based services are provided to support successful development and relationships," said CDSS Director Will Lightbourne. "This historic legislation provides the framework to achieve this goal and strengthen public accountability throughout the child welfare system with the use of significant outcome measurements to identify best practices and the most successful care providers."

AB 403 addresses these issues by ensuring that families who provide foster care receive targeted training and support so that they are better prepared to support youth living with them. The bill also advances California's long-standing goal to move away from the use of long-term group home care by increasing youth placement in family settings and by transforming existing group home care into places where youth who are not ready to be placed with families can receive short term, intensive treatment. The measure creates a timeline to implement this shift in placement options, and it calls for the adoption of new standards and performance measures. The Governor's Budget appropriates \$9.6 million to further the goals of this measure by ensuring that social workers can provide core services to families and by helping local governments recruit and retain knowledgeable and well-informed foster families.

AB 403 begins to phase in on January 1, 2016, with some provisions taking effect in later years.