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April 6, 2018

ALL COUNTY LETTER NO.18-42

TO: ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS
ALL CHIEF PROBATION OFFICERS
ALL FOSTER CARE MANAGERS
ALL TITLE IV-E AGREEMENT TRIBES
ALL JUDICIAL COUNCIL STAFF

SUBJECT: FAMILY FINDING AND ENGAGEMENT (FFE)

REFERENCE: WELFARE AND INSTITUTIONS CODE (W&IC) SECTIONS [309](#), [319](#), [358](#), AND [628](#); ALL COUNTY LETTERS (ACLs) [09-86](#), [14-75](#), [16-16](#), [16-52](#) AND [17-65](#); ALL COUNTY INFORMATION NOTICE (ACIN) [I-35-11](#)

PURPOSE

The purposes of this letter are to:

1. Remind county welfare departments (CWDs) and county probation departments (CPDs) of their family finding requirements and role in supporting the Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) transition to increase the number of youth in home-based care.
2. Reiterate relevant guidance offered in prior All County Letters (ACLs) and an All County Information Notice (ACIN).
3. Suggest practices and highlight resources which counties may find useful when they conduct family finding and engagement on behalf of children and youth in care.

BACKGROUND

As used in this ACL, “family finding and engagement” (FFE) is a broad concept which encompasses not only the statutory requirements pertaining to identifying, locating and

REASON FOR THIS TRANSMITTAL

- State Law Change
- Federal Law or Regulation Change
- Court Order
- Clarification Requested by One or More Counties
- Initiated by CDSS

notifying the relatives of a child in foster care, but also related efforts to foster life-long familial connections for children and youth in care. These additional efforts, which are meant to enhance the long-term well-being of children and youth in care, are an important component of California's Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) initiative to reduce the use of congregate care and improve child welfare outcomes. Intensive FFE can be used by counties to identify possible relative or non-relative extended family member (NREFM) placements for children and youth currently placed in group homes, potentially allowing those children and youth to step down to a home-based care setting, consistent with the goals of CCR. The practice of FFE (above and beyond the statutorily-required relative finding noted below) should also be used when opening a case as a way to identify the best possible placement for the child or youth. Additional information on FFE practices at the front end of a case will be forthcoming in another county letter.

RELATIVE NOTIFICATION STATUTE (ASSEMBLY BILL [AB] 938 AND SENATE BILL [SB] 794)

The requirement at W&IC sections [309](#) (when the CWD has taken custody of the child) and [628](#) (when the CPD has taken custody of the child) for counties to identify, locate and notify the relatives of a child who has been removed from his or her home was enacted by Assembly Bill 938. These requirements specify both the timeframe and the scope of the required investigation:

- Within 30 days of a child's removal, the relevant county staff person (social worker or probation officer) must:
 - Conduct an investigation in order to identify and locate relatives, including all:
 - grandparents;
 - adult siblings; and
 - other adult relatives (as defined at W&IC section [319\(f\)\(2\)](#)).
 - Unless otherwise provided, give all adult relatives who have been located with both written and, when appropriate, oral notification of the child's situation.

"Sibling" is defined at W&IC section 309(e)(1) as a person related to the identified child by blood, adoption, or affinity through a common legal or biological parent. "Relative" is defined at W&IC section [319\(f\)\(2\)](#) as an adult who is related to the child by blood, adoption or affinity within the fifth degree of kinship, or by marriage (even if ended by death or dissolution). The notification requirement applies unless a history of family or domestic violence makes notification inappropriate. Detailed guidance regarding initial

relative notification, including specific information on required elements of notifications can be found in ACL [09-86](#).

An additional relative notification requirement was imposed on CWDs only by SB 794. This requirement specifies that, in addition to the relatives listed above, a CWD (but not a CPD) is required to identify, locate and notify parents who have legal custody of the child's siblings can be found in ACL [16-16](#). CPDs, while not mandated to do so, may find such notifications a best practice.

In addition to reiterating the general requirements of ACL 09-86 and their applicability to certain parents of a child's siblings, ACL 16-16 advised counties of the official Judicial Council form required to be provided to all relatives who are contacted.

Counties are reminded that if a change in the child's placement becomes necessary, the county must again consider relatives for placement. Statute also requires that a county assess as a potential placement any previously-unassessed relative who comes forward and requests an assessment. Further guidance on the requirement to exercise due diligence to assess relatives can be found in ACL [17-65](#). The reasons above illustrate the importance of continuing to authentically engage family members after the initial placement search has concluded. Unassessed relatives may also be considered as part of the Child and Family Team, and therefore may be able to support a placement if it becomes necessary.

OTHER EFFORTS TO BUILD CONNECTIONS

Beyond the requirements regarding relative notification lies the wide-ranging field of FFE, which seeks not merely to identify a relative caregiver for a child, but to build a network of permanent connections which can support the child throughout his or her life. These efforts begin with the use of innovative approaches to identify and locate relatives and other potential familial and non-related connections, and also include crucial follow-up and engagement practices which ensure that not only is the ideal caregiver identified, but also that other necessary life-long supports are developed and maintained for the child.

Strategies to provide for extended engagement with a multitude of potential permanent connections can prove critical for a child's long-term well-being. In addition to building a life-long safety net, extended family members and other caring individuals can fulfill more concrete roles in a child's life, such as providing respite or alternative care if needed. It should be remembered that fostering and maintaining connections between a child and those of importance in his or her life, familial or otherwise, is crucial to the child's well-being, whether or not the child is placed with a relative or a non-related caregiver.

SUGGESTED PRACTICES

When counties are developing or implementing policies and procedures for FFE, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) offers the following suggestions as steps which may contribute to the success of these efforts:

- **THE CHILD AS A PRIMARY INFORMATION SOURCE**

When searching for a child's relatives, it is common for a county worker to begin by interviewing immediate family members, including the parents, if available, to obtain the names of more distant relatives. The use of specialized software is also standard practice; other digital resources, such as case records or social media, are also available. Oftentimes, however, the most direct source of such information can be overlooked—the child himself or herself. Children, even young children, are fully aware of those individuals who are the most important to them and who are capable of offering love and support. If asked, children are almost always more than willing to identify these potential caregivers.

To optimize a child's contribution to FFE efforts, the county should **ask** the child to share the names of those who are important to him or her; **identify** those individuals (i.e., discover the real name of "Aunt Sally"); and **follow through** in locating and engaging those individuals. This can be done by employing Safety Organized Practice (SOP) techniques such as *Appreciative Inquiry* or the *Three Houses Tool*. For more information on SOP, counties may contact the California Well-Being Project at IV-EWaiver@dss.ca.gov. Even though most relatives and other familial figures who are contacted may not end up being a caregiver for the child, many of them can play important roles in supporting the child—if those connections are properly cultivated and encouraged.

- **DEDICATED STAFF TO CONDUCT FAMILY FINDING**

Based on counties' reporting of their FFE efforts, CDSS has found that one consistent indicator of success has been the ability of a county to assign dedicated staff to conduct FFE activities. Allowing individuals to devote their entire attention to the task of identifying and locating potential permanent connections, rather than treating these responsibilities as a fraction of a wide-ranging workload, generally appears to result in an increase both in the number of relatives located and in the quality of engagement. Although CDSS recognizes that budgetary and/or workload considerations can preclude this practice, it is recommended that counties make an effort to create or reallocate one or more staff positions reserved exclusively for FFE activities.

In addition, CDSS stresses the importance of documenting FFE efforts in a child's case file. The existence of substantive notes on contacts, follow-up efforts, and so on, can prove beneficial; particularly if, or when, different staff members may be assigned to conduct further FFE efforts.

- **FOLLOW-UP AND ENGAGEMENT**

For family finding efforts to be successful, potential permanent connections, including many who will not be the child's primary caregiver, must be fully engaged and supported by the county so that they can become part of a permanent support network for the child. Engagement should be thought of as a range of activities and interactions with the child and his or her caregiver that creates an effective working relationship for change. Although placement with a relative caregiver to some extent can naturally facilitate the formation of permanent familial connections, efforts by the county to encourage those connections (particularly with relatives who might not otherwise form an attachment with the child) can further assure the child's well-being through adolescence and beyond. If circumstances dictate placement with a non-related caregiver, the formation of bonds with family members can become even more critical to preserving a child's sense of belonging and self-identity. For these reasons, counties should undertake maximum efforts to cultivate connections, to whatever extent is possible, with as many relatives and other important persons in the child's life as are willing to be engaged, and these efforts should continue throughout the child's stay in care, regardless of the child's placement.

- **ESTABLISHED FFE MODELS**

Counties should not feel as though they need to invent a practice model for family finding and engagement from scratch; a great deal of thoughtful work in this area has been put forward by advocacy groups and prominent stakeholders in the child welfare field. These models can either be adopted wholesale, or can be used as a framework within which a county can make adjustments to meet its particular needs. In order to implement a comprehensive FFE model, a county generally can choose one of two paths. It can utilize a proprietary model, either by contracting with the model's developers directly, or by contracting with a third party which uses the model. Alternately, counties may choose to use publicly available resources to develop a unique model independently.

NOTE: The inclusion of specific models and resources in this ACL does not imply that CDSS recommends the use of any particular model or resource. While the models and resources listed below may be used as starting points, counties are strongly advised to use maximum discretion in determining what FFE efforts best fit their particular circumstances.

Proprietary Models: The most popular FFE proprietary models include the [Family Finding](#) practice developed by Kevin Campbell and offered through the Seneca Family of Agencies and the [3-5-7 Model®](#) developed by Darla Henry. Counties wishing to contract out FFE efforts can enter into an agreement either with the original developer of the model (i.e., Seneca for Family Finding), or with a Foster Family Agency (FFA) which uses the model to conduct FFE.

When contracting with an outside party for FFE services, some important factors to consider include:

- The scope of the outside party's activities. Depending on the specific contract, the FFA or other party might offer only to locate and notify relatives; or it might also conduct follow-up and engagement with potential caregivers and other permanent connections. There have been some indications that a higher level of success can be achieved when there is continuity in the engagement process.
- Interoperability between the county and the contractor. A contract can provide value only if the county and the outside party work together seamlessly to further the well-being of the child. To this end, the county must be assured of the contractor's capabilities, and county staff must be confident in accepting the contractor's results. An FFE contract is not likely to succeed if the contractor's efforts are routinely disregarded by the county.

An Independent Model: For a county that does not wish to contract out FFE activities, there are many publicly-available resources which can be used to develop and implement an FFE model specific to the county. An example of a comprehensive model is [Six Steps to Find a Family: A Practice Guide to Family Search and Engagement \(FSE\)](#), produced for the federal government by a broad group of stakeholders (with a heavy emphasis on California). In some cases, these models can be adopted as-is; alternatively, a county can begin with publicly-available resources and make modifications based on the county's unique circumstances and needs.

Additionally, a sizable body of research into various FFE strategies has been published, which may provide further insights into which approaches may be most effective for a particular county. General guidance on FFE practices, including an outline of suggested steps and various resources, can be found in ACIN [I-35-11](#) (please note that some links may no longer be valid). Also included in this letter are examples of resources which CDSS believes may prove useful to any county wishing to develop its own practice model.

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CONTACTS

Any questions regarding this ACL should be directed to the Foster Caregiver Policy and Support Unit at (916) 651-7465 or via email to kinship.care@dss.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Original Document Signed By:

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Children and Family Services Division

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RESOURCES

[CalSWEC - Family Finding and Engagement \(FFE\) Toolkit](#)
[Seneca Family of Agencies - Family Finding Resources](#)
[Child Welfare Information Gateway - Family Engagement](#)
[grandfamilies.org - Best Practice Inventory](#)
[grandfamilies.org - Relative Notification Checklist](#)