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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

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REASON FOR THIS TRANSMITTAL

February 17, 2016

ALL COUNTY LETTER NO. 16-10

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

TO: ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS
ALL CHIEF PROBATION OFFICERS
COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA
ALL FOSTER FAMILY AGENCY DIRECTORS
ALL CDSS ADOPTION DISTRICT OFFICES
ALL CDSS COMMUNITY CARE LICENSING LIAISONS
ALL CDSS COMMUNITY CARE LICENSING PROGRAM MANAGERS

SUBJECT: RESOURCE FAMILY APPROVAL PROGRAM

REFERENCE: [WELFARE AND INSTITUTIONS CODE \(W&IC\) SECTION 16519.5;](#) [HEALTH AND SAFETY CODE \(H&S\) SECTION 1517;](#) [ASSEMBLY BILL \(AB\) 403 \(CHAPTER 773, STATUTES OF 2015\),](#) [AB 340 \(CHAPTER 464, STATUTES OF 2007\); SENATE BILL \(SB\) 1460 \(CHAPTER 772, STATUTES OF 2014\),](#) [SB 1013 \(CHAPTER 35, STATUTES OF 2012\)](#)

The purpose of this All County Letter (ACL) is to provide counties, licensed foster care providers and other interested stakeholders with information on the Resource Family Approval (RFA) Program in preparation for the mandated statewide implementation on January 1, 2017. This Program will directly impact county welfare and probation departments and licensed foster care providers by creating a new foster caregiver approval process that replaces multiple existing processes of licensing or certifying foster homes, approving relatives, nonrelative extended family members (NREFMs), prospective adoptive parents, and legal guardians.

Background/Overview

The RFA Program was enacted by legislation sponsored by the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) in 2007 and expanded through [SB 1013 \(Chapter 35, Statutes of 2012\)](#). The statute requires the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), in consultation with county child welfare agencies, including juvenile probation, foster parent associations, and other interested community parties to

implement a unified, family-friendly and child-centered RFA process. Per statute, the new process was required to be tested in up to five early implementing counties prior to statewide implementation.

Five volunteer counties from varying geographic locations were selected by CDSS to be early implementers: Kings, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Santa Clara. The five counties began early implementation between November 1, 2013 and August 1, 2014. Since their implementation, the five counties, CDSS, and other stakeholders have collaborated on creating policies and procedures, developing implementation guidelines, assessing challenges and barriers, and establishing processes for data collection and review.

A second cohort of nine early implementing counties is scheduled to implement their RFA Program between January and July of 2016. These counties include: Butte, Madera, Monterey, Orange, San Joaquin, Siskiyou, Stanislaus, Ventura, and Yolo.

Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) and the RFA Program

Implementation of the RFA Program is a key component to the success of the CCR effort. This new process for approving resource families seeks to improve the experience children, youth, and nonminor dependents (NMD's) have in foster care by increasing the caregiver's ability to effectively meet the diverse needs of those in their care.

The RFA process, in combination with the [Quality Parenting Initiative \(QPI\)](#) that seeks to improve the partnership between foster parents and placing agencies, is intended to work together to build the capacity (both numerically and qualitatively) of the continuum of foster care placements. Although participation in the QPI is not a requirement of RFA, the increased collaboration, support and engagement of foster parents is essential to moving children out of congregate care successfully.

Funding was included in the 2015-16 enacted budget for the implementation of CCR and additional funding is being proposed in the 2016-17 Governor's Budget. Information on the proposed CCR funding can be found in the CCR premise description located in the Estimate Methodologies section of the Governor's 2016-17 Budget and can be accessed on the CDSS website at <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/cdssweb/default.htm> under the Highlights section. If the Budget Act of 2016 is signed by the Governor, CDSS, in collaboration with CWDA, will determine the appropriate methodology to distribute the funds to county welfare departments.

What is RFA?

RFA is a new foster caregiver approval process that improves the way caregivers (related and non-related) are approved by preparing families to better meet the needs of

vulnerable children, youth and NMDs in the county child welfare and/or probation systems. The RFA Program replaces the existing processes for licensing foster family homes, certifying homes of licensed foster family agencies, approving relatives and NREFMs as caregivers, and approving legal guardians and adoptive families by combining the best elements of all the processes into a single approval standard. The process is streamlined and unifies approval standards for all caregivers regardless of the child's case plan, thereby eliminating the duplication of existing processes such as background checks.

RFA creates a framework for all families, including relative and NREFM caregivers, to receive the same information, training and opportunities for support. A resource family completes one approval process, and once approved, may choose to provide care on a short- or long-term basis. Once a resource family is approved, they will not have to undergo any additional approval or licensure if they choose to adopt or be appointed a guardian for a child in foster care. Approval of a family, however, does not guarantee placement of the child with that family. The child's worker will continue to make placement decisions based on what is in the best interest of the child. Through the RFA process, approved resource families are better equipped to support and prepare a child for permanency.

Resource Family Comprehensive Assessment and Approval Process

The RFA process involves completion of a comprehensive assessment that includes assessing the applicant's ability to honor a child's or NMD's natural connections; parent a child/NMD in a family setting; provide a safe, nurturing and stable home; and provide permanence or prepare a child/NMD for permanence. The primary components of the comprehensive assessment include:

Home Environment:

This component requires an applicant to meet standards that include, but are not limited to, building and grounds, storage requirements, capacity determination, and background checks.

Background Checks:

Comprehensive criminal records check combines components from the current separate approval processes. Resource family applicants will complete one background check, and once assessed and cleared, will not have to repeat the process if the family chooses to adopt.

Psychosocial Assessment:

The psychosocial assessment creates a comprehensive picture of the family by exploring the applicant's family dynamics and characteristics, including mental, physical, and emotional health. This assessment helps to identify the family's strengths, as well

as the supports or additional training that may be needed for the family to best meet the needs of children, youth, and NMDs in out-of-home care.

Training

This component of the comprehensive assessment includes the family's completion of pre-approval training. The Written Directives (described on page five of this document) provide guidelines and requirements on training topics that must be provided to all prospective resource families and completed prior to the approval of the resource family. Pursuant to [Welfare and Institutions Code section 16519.5\(g\)\(13\)](#), a resource family applicant shall complete a minimum of 12 hours of pre-approval training. Once approved, post-approval training consists of a minimum of eight hours annually. The Written Directives are currently under revision; therefore, Version three of the Written Directives will reflect current statute regarding resource family training.

Once a comprehensive assessment is completed, in order to approve the family, a written assessment of the resource family must be completed, which includes a determination that the family possesses the following characteristics:

- An understanding of the safety, permanency, and well-being needs of children and NMDs who have been victims of child abuse and neglect, a capacity and willingness to meet those needs, including the need for protection, and the willingness to make use of support resources offered by the agency, have a support structure in place, or both.
- An understanding of children's and NMD's needs and development, effective parenting skills or knowledge about parenting, and a capacity to act as a reasonable and prudent parent in day-to-day decision making.
- An understanding of his or her role as a resource family and the capacity to work cooperatively with the County or approving agency and other service providers in implementing a child's or NMD's case plan.
- The financial ability within the household to ensure the stability and financial security of the family.
- The ability and willingness to maintain the least restrictive and most family-like environment that serves the needs of a child or NMD.

Placement Prior to Approval

The RFA process provides for placement of a child or NMD with a family prior to their approval as a resource family based on two situations:

- 1) In an emergency situation, a child or NMD may be placed with a relative or NREFM prior to approval if the following requirements are met:

- An inspection of the home and grounds that indicates it is free of conditions that pose undue risk to the health and safety of the child.
 - A criminal records check (pursuant to [W&IC section 16504.5](#) and Child Abuse Central Index).
 - Initiation of the RFA process within five business days if continued placement is desired including completion of:
 - Live scan background check within ten days of placement.
 - All remaining components of the RFA process within 90 days of placement.
- 2) If a compelling reason exists based on the best interest and needs of the child, and the family has already successfully completed the home environment assessment, a child or NMD may be placed in a home prior to approval. The requirements to be met post placement include:
- Completion of a psychosocial assessment within 90 calendar days of placement in the home.
 - Completion of all required pre-approval training within 90 days of placement in the home.

When a placement is made prior to approval for an emergency or compelling reason, the applicant is not eligible to receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children Foster Care benefit payments (including federal financial participation) until the applicant receives approval as a resource family by completing all components of the approval process, including pre-approval training, and meets any other Title IV-E criteria.

Written Directives

[Section 16519.5 of the W&IC](#) gives CDSS the authority to temporarily administer the RFA Program through “Written Directives.” The CDSS has issued Written Directives and forms for implementing the RFA Program to ensure consistent standards among all counties and approving agencies. The Written Directives contain the processes, standards, and requirements of the RFA Program and have the same force and effect as regulations.

Version two of the Written Directives is currently in effect for all early implementation counties. With ongoing collaboration among early implementing counties and other stakeholders, revisions will continue to be made as RFA moves towards statewide implementation. The Written Directives can be found on the CDSS website at <http://www.childsworld.ca.gov/PG3416.htm>.

Key Information

- By January 1, 2017, all counties and licensed foster care providers statewide must implement the RFA process for all new applicants.
 - All early implementation counties were required to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with CDSS. For all counties beginning implementation on January 1, 2017, this will not be required.
- Once implemented, counties shall ensure all new related and non-related applicants participate exclusively in the RFA Program, including families being considered for probation placements.
- Prior to January 1, 2017, counties will need to prepare a comprehensive Implementation Plan for submission to CDSS per [W&IC section 16519.5\(g\)\(1\)](#).
 - The purpose of the plan is to provide guidance to counties by preparing for implementation of the RFA Program in their county through thoughtful planning and collaboration with key partners both internally and externally. It will also allow CDSS to provide feedback, guidance, and technical assistance to the county to aid in a smooth transition to the RFA Program.
 - A template providing details on what is required in the Plan and examples of early implementing county plans can be found on the CDSS website at <http://www.childsworld.ca.gov/PG3416.htm>.
 - Counties will need to review [W&IC section 16519](#) et seq. and the Written Directives in their entirety to prepare their proposed RFA Program implementation plan.
- By December 31, 2019, all existing licensed foster family homes, all certified family homes, and all approved relatives and NREFMs who wish to continue to care for a foster child must be an approved resource family.
 - Licensed foster family homes, certified family homes and approved relatives and NREFM's with an approved adoption home study completed prior to January 1, 2018, shall be deemed to be a resource family.
 - A licensed foster family home, a certified family home, and an approved relative and NREFM who had a child in placement at any time between January 1, 2017 and December 31, 2017, may be approved as a resource family on the date of successful completion of a psychosocial assessment.
 - A license, certificate of approval, and relative and NREFM approval will need to be surrendered at the time of approval as a resource family so the family is not required to comply with different laws.
 - All foster family licenses, certificates of approval for certified family homes, and approvals of relatives and NREFMs shall be forfeited by operation of law on December 31, 2019.

- More information regarding the conversion procedures for all existing families will be forthcoming in a future ACIN.

Preparing for Implementation – Resources and Recommendations

- County welfare departments should engage and consult with county probation partners and other affected parties early on to collaborate on implementation of the RFA Program.
- Although tribes are not required to implement the RFA process for tribally approved homes, it is important to include them as valuable stakeholders in the RFA Program.
- As training is a critical piece of RFA implementation, it is recommended that counties begin assessing their training capacity, curricula, and space needs to include all families in the process.
- A Readiness Assessment tool has been created as a resource for counties to begin preparing for implementation of RFA. The readiness tool can be found on the CDSS website at <http://www.childsworld.ca.gov/PG3416.htm>.
- Counties are encouraged to visit the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) <http://calswec.berkeley.edu/toolkits/resource-family-approval-rfa> to access an RFA Toolkit with information and tools for counties to use as they prepare to implement RFA. Templates and tools continue to be developed to assist counties with implementing RFA and to provide guidance on the assessment processes. These resources will also be included on the CalSWEC and the CDSS RFA websites as they become available.
- Training modules are currently in development by CDSS and CalSWEC for statewide use by county RFA staff. The training will be piloted with early implementing counties and statewide roll out is projected for late 2016. The trainings will be provided by the Regional Training Academies in collaboration with CDSS.
- The CDSS will be providing on-going technical assistance and training to counties to assist in preparation for full implementation through means such as All County Information Notices (ACINS), county visits, and regional convenings.
- The first five early implementing counties have a wealth of knowledge and experience that can be a valuable resource for other counties as they begin preparing for implementation. Counties are encouraged to connect with early implementing counties for guidance and support.
- The CDSS will also be developing plans to provide technical assistance to licensed foster care providers and will continue to provide information through ACLs, ACINs, and Information Releases.

It is anticipated that the RFA Program will result in better outcomes for children and families by simultaneously addressing the safety of children in foster care and the length of time it takes for them to achieve permanency when they cannot return to their parents. The goal is to improve caregiver standards and better prepare families to meet the needs of children in the foster care system by providing increased support and training. Families who are better prepared and supported will mean that children in their care will experience less placement changes and exit foster care in less time than under the current processes.

If you have any questions regarding this ACL, please email the RFA Program Unit at RFA@dss.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Original Document Signed By:

GREGORY E. ROSE
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Children and Family Services Division