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## **Two California foster care bills miss the mark**

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This spring, the California Legislature is considering two foster care reform measures. While they are well-intentioned, one of these bills would have limited benefits while the other could be highly detrimental. Neither bill addresses the core issue with foster care, which is that we have too much of it.

I do not question the need for foster care. While we might wish every family was a loving one, the sad fact is that parents sometimes fail their children so badly that separation is the least-bad alternative. Unfortunately, removing children from their homes and placing them under temporary care is a necessary evil for which we rely on the government.

But while foster care is necessary, it too often can be evil. Good foster parents, now known as “resource families,” are hard to find. Some look at monthly foster care payments, meager as they are, as a source of income, skimping on clothes and toys for the kids in their care. Other resource parents, who are also caring for their own children, treat foster kids like second class citizens in their homes, piling additional trauma on kids who have already been failed by their parents.

To safeguard foster children’s welfare, the government has layered on social workers, lawyers, judges, and other professionals who monitor each child’s case. Because these paid professionals may be managing too many foster children to adequately assist each one, counties have brought volunteers into the mix. Court Appointed Special Advocates typically work with one or two children, adding a more targeted perspective to periodic court hearings.

While these professionals and volunteers have the best of intentions, they often complicate foster children’s lives, requiring them to answer repetitive questions about their status and their preferences. This is especially stressful for foster children when they come into conflict with their resource families.

These conflicts can often result in “placement changes,” as children are shuffled from one resource family to another with or without their siblings. One foster child I know went through four placements in two years, with the placement changes often being traumatic.

So, for many foster children, their time in the system is nasty and brutal. As such, it should also be short. Lawmakers should incentivize participants in the foster care system to find permanent placements for all foster children as quickly as possible. Since reunification with the biological family is often impractical due to birth parents’ violence or addiction, adoption may be the only solution.

And while many couples are interested in adopting, they usually prefer a foreign newborn to an American child dealing with the baggage of bad parenting. California counties must work harder

to recruit adoptive parents and state funding should be used to further compensate adoptive parents rather than prolong a child's time in foster care.

Unfortunately, neither of the measures in the State Senate address this core issue. Sen. Dave Cortese's foster care bill would allow non-minor dependents (NMDs) to stay in the foster system until age 22, instead of the current 21. It's a reasonable idea since so many foster kids fail to launch when they age out of the system. But a year of extra services probably won't make much difference.

NMDs are nominally required to either be in the workforce or school to remain in foster care. But many don't comply with these requirements and judges are loathe to terminate services before they age out. One more year of meeting with social workers and attending hearings may not make much of a difference in the long run.

Sen. Scott Wiener's new foster care bill is worse than ineffectual. The measure would exclude resource parents from the foster care system if they're not accommodating toward LGBTQ+ children. Of course, it would be nice if all resource parents were maximally tolerant, but since we already have a shortage of quality foster care providers, the state cannot be choosy. The unintended result of Wiener's measure would be more foster kids being placed in group homes or warehoused in county assessment centers awaiting placement.

But regardless of their respective merits, these measures will, at best, save only a few of the tens of thousands of children and teenagers drowning in the foster care system. Instead, lawmakers should be throwing foster children a life-raft: one leading to the forever home that they all deserve.

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