

## Problem

California faces devastating wildfires every year that displace thousands of people and leave many of them without basic resources and homes to return to. This year, California faces concurrent crises as wildfire season approaches and the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage communities across the state. Additional resources and supports will be necessary to help wildfire victims, who have already been adversely affected by job losses, school closures, the isolation of stay-at-home orders, and will likely be unable to rely on community-based organizations that face diminished capacity, depleted resources and the impacts of an economic recession.

While everyone will struggle in the face of these simultaneous disasters, children and youth in foster care and their caregivers encounter a unique set of challenges. COVID-19 social distancing efforts have already disrupted vital services for children and youth in the foster care system. Reunification efforts, visitation, court processes and therapy sessions have been upended, threatening the well-being of children and youth who have already suffered significant trauma and loss. This year's wildfires will further compound this dire situation. As foster families and youth in extended foster care are confronted with evacuation orders and displacement, it will be increasingly difficult to support stability, nurture important relationships, and minimize further disruptions for these vulnerable children and youth. To mitigate these challenges, children and youth in foster care and their caregivers must have access to dedicated resources to help them survive and rebuild.

The state is legally responsible for meeting the needs of children and youth in foster care, which is particularly critical in the wake of a pandemic or natural disaster. Yet foster families who have opened their homes to children in foster care do not receive additional funding from the state during times of emergency and rarely receive additional supports and services. Any extra costs, including to replace lost belongings including basic needs like food and clothing, secure temporary housing, or travel to and from a temporary home to essential appointments, place an undue burden on foster families at a time when resources are stretched thin and emotions are running high. Without needed support, previously stable placements may disrupt, causing further trauma and instability for foster children.

In the critical moments during and after a natural disaster, we cannot ignore the unique needs of children and youth in foster care and their caregivers, especially when support systems are already strained due to a public health crisis. Although no one is left unscathed during a disaster, foster children and youth and their caregivers need proactive planning and dedicated resources to ensure their basic needs are met in these challenging times.

## Solution

The California Legislature should establish a statewide Child Welfare Disaster Response Fund that:

1. Supports proactive local/county disaster planning and capacity building to improve services available to assist foster children and youth and their caregivers in the event of a natural disaster and co-occurring public health crisis;
2. Ensures grants and resources are immediately available to disaster-impacted communities to mitigate the urgent needs of foster children and youth and their caregivers, including transportation, interim housing, and replacement of essential belongings; and
3. Aids California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and Office of Emergency Services' (OES) efforts to ensure local assistance centers understand the unique needs of foster families and have the capacity to connect foster children and youth and their caregivers to targeted services and supports.

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