

2007 Price Child Health and Welfare Journalism Award

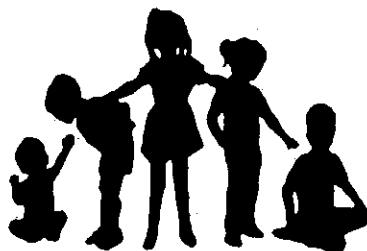
First Place (tie)

The San Francisco Chronicle

"No Refuge"

written by San Francisco Chronicle staff

*a long-term series of editorials and stories exposing the failings
and deficiencies of California's foster care system, and urging
positive change for the children involved*



San Francisco Chronicle

a Hearst Newspaper

Phil Bronstein

Editor and Executive Vice President

To the Judges:

The dysfunction of California's foster-care system was not among the priorities in the state Capitol in fall 2005, when The San Francisco Chronicle began its campaign on behalf of the 80,000 children the system was supposed to serve. The human cost of the system's failings was staggering. Nearly a third of all foster youth were becoming homeless within their first year of "emancipation" at age 18. One in four was incarcerated within two years of leaving the system. Only one in 100 went on to earn a college degree. The state overseers of the system were not even tracking how many foster children were dying — let alone why. The extent and quality of services varied widely from county to county. The lawyers and social workers assigned to advocate for these young people were overwhelmed with enormous caseloads, each typically responsible for the welfare of several hundred children.

In a series of editorials and news stories that began in fall of 2005 and continues today, The Chronicle identified the deficiencies in the system, laid out a framework for reform on its editorial page — and pressed, relentlessly, for the governor and legislators to act.

Our coverage went beyond the statistics to summon the voices of foster youth to explain in poignant detail how these policy failures were affecting their lives. Editorial writer Pati Poblete tracked the travails of Sade Daniels, who was shuffled among seven homes in four years after her drug-addicted mother could no longer care for her. Poblete, author of "Sade's story — lessons for all," was the lead writer for much of the series.

The Chronicle's commitment to improving the system for these children — *our* children, *our* collective responsibility, as our editorials reminded — was vigorous and deep and continued after Poblete left the paper in August 2006. Editorial Page Editor John Diaz broke the story about how a college-grant program designed to give emancipated foster youth a chance at an education was so poorly administered that the promised checks were arriving far too late in the year — forcing students to drop out — or, in some cases, never arrived at all. As you will see in the editorial and follow-up, legislators and the bureaucracy started responding on the day of the editorial, "A false promise to foster youth" — and the long-delayed checks were soon on their way.

The Chronicle kept the pressure on the governor and legislators for a sweeping reform of the system, and on Sept. 22, 2006, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose office had been resistant to some of the stiffened state accountability measures when they were going through the Legislature, signed all eight bills that represented the core of the

reforms advocated by our editorial page. In a nod to the role of The Chronicle's impact on the issue, the governor's office gave the exclusive story to our editorial board, which we broke on our editorial page the day of the big signing announcement.

Testaments to The Chronicle's influence poured in, as underscored by these published letters to the editor:

- "I am writing to congratulate you on the occasion of the governor signing eight bills into law to reform foster care in California. Much of the credit goes to The Chronicle. Thank you so much for taking on this issue and doing so with such skill and conviction," wrote John F. O'Toole, director of the National Center for Youth Law in Oakland.
- "Kudos to Chronicle Editorial Page Editor John Diaz and former editorial writer Pati Poblete for calling attention to the needs of this 'hidden population' and serving as California's conscience on foster-care issues," wrote Miriam Krinsky, executive director of Children's Law Center of Los Angeles.
- "By bringing these issues to light, The Chronicle played an important role in the passage of this life-changing legislation," wrote Sam Cobbs, executive director of First Place Fund for Youth, an Oakland organization that helps foster youth make the transition to adulthood. The group has since announced that its annual "Community Hero Award" would go to The Chronicle Editorial Board.

We're gratified by the recognition our work has received from those who have dedicated their lives to the critical but often-frustrating job of helping these young people overcome the odds against them. California's foster-care system now has more resources and more accountability for its efforts to provide homes and hope to the state's most vulnerable citizens. But we are also keenly aware that our job is not finished. As the snafus with the college grants demonstrated, even the most well-intentioned legislation must be carried out with equal commitment and care. California's foster-care system now has more resources and more accountability for its efforts to provide homes and hope to the state's most vulnerable citizens. The campaign showed how the institutional voice of one newspaper, when raised with clarity and conviction for the betterment of society, can make a difference. We are proud to nominate our work on behalf of California's foster children for the Price Child Health and Welfare Journalism Award.

Sincerely,



Phil Bronstein

Editor

San Francisco Chronicle

SUNDAY, AUGUST 13, 2006

EDITORIAL

Sade's story — lessons for all

SADE DANIELS is no stranger to setbacks — as a foster youth, it has become a way of life. But when Sade (say shaw-DAY) began getting rejection letters from all the colleges she had applied to last spring, she felt a surge of panic.

In merely three months, she was about to turn 18. For most teenagers, that milestone age marks the beginning of adulthood. But for foster youth such as Daniels, it would mean the end of a safety net. Without a college acceptance letter, Daniels feared she would become just another foster-care statistic — homeless, jobless or incarcerated.

At 18 years old, foster youth officially “age out” of the system, meaning they are cut off from all county services, such as housing, allowance, counseling, medical assistance and educational support. What’s worse, many foster youth say being in the state’s system leaves them unprepared to live on their own.

When our first editorial ran on the shy, soft-spoken foster youth almost a year ago, Daniels, then 17, had one thing on her mind: emancipation.

Daniels, who had been in the system since she was just 13 years old, knew the odds were against her. “It’s like all of a sudden, you’re 18 and they expect you to be an adult, but the system doesn’t teach you to be adult,” she said in our Sept. 11, 2005, editorial about her plight. Her last name was withheld from that editorial because of her age.

Soon after that editorial, Daniels was surprised by the amount of support she received from strangers. She was inspired to work harder in school and was determined to go to college — Spelman College, to be exact.

Daniels had various counselors, but there was no one to advise her on what to do beyond high school. She was not aware that she needed one more year of science and another year of foreign language courses to get into college — until she received a rejection letter from UC Berkeley informing her that she lacked the requirements. “I thought, ‘In three months, I’m emancipating and I have nowhere to go,’” she said.

In foster care, however, youth are allowed to stay in the system beyond their 18th birthday if they can prove that they will graduate from high school by the time they are 19. When Daniels learned of this from a social worker, she said she “knew what she had to do.”

“I stopped going to my math class so that I would flunk. I knew if I was forced to stay in high school one more year, that would keep me from being emancipated. I was desperate. I had no college set, there wasn’t enough time to apply for transitional housing. I refused to be homeless.”

Daniels succeeded in flunking math, yet she still had a 3.69 grade-point average. Now, she says, her mind is focused on passing chemistry and French in the fall so she can finally get into Spelman. If there’s one thing she has learned, she says, it’s that curve balls are always being thrown. “It’s how you react that matters. I just have to stay on track,” she says.

Assemblyman Mark Leno,

Sitting in suspense

Among the key bills awaiting action in the Senate Appropriations Committee are:

- ▶ AB2489 (Mark Leno, D-San Francisco) — Provides foster youth with financial assistance and the campus-based support they need to complete their college education.
- ▶ AB2216 (Karen Bass, D-Baldwin Vista) — Creates a structure for leadership and accountability for the management of the agencies that provide services to foster youth.
- ▶ AB2194 (Bass) — Extends Independent Living Program services to youth placed with non-related legal guardians and those adopted at age 14 or older to ensure they are prepared to live on their own after they emancipate.
- ▶ SB1712 (Carole Migden, D-San Francisco) — Establishes a three-year, four-county pilot program focused on increasing adoptions of older foster youth.

D-San Francisco, says his bill, AB2489, could have helped Daniels if it had already been the law.

“Someone would have counseled Sade to make sure she was on the college-preparatory path, and make sure that her high-school records kept up with her as she was moved from one placement to the next,” said Leno. “She also would have had mentorship and tutoring — all of that comes with the foster-youth program that this bill would expand to all foster youth. Currently, it only covers 12 percent of foster youth, those in group homes.”

An impressive \$83 million has been added to foster-care programs in the state budget. Now it is time to move key bills such as these through the Legislature and onto the governor’s desk.

Maybe then, foster youth can navigate their way to adulthood with fewer barriers than Sade Daniels encountered.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2006

EDITORIALS

Governor — help these kids

CALIFORNIA legislators have just approved a significant reform bill to bring consistency and accountability to its troubled foster-care system. The question now is whether Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who launched into politics as an advocate for children with his after-school program, will sign AB2216 into law.

He must.

The Child Welfare Leadership and Performance Accountability Act of 2006, authored by Assembly members Karen Bass, D-Los Angeles, and Bill Maze, R-Visalia, would force the state to finally acknowledge and address the vast disparities in the quality of care and access to services for foster youth in counties throughout the state.

AB2216 will require the many state and local agencies that deal with various aspects of foster care to communicate with each other, with an intent to identify and expand best practices. The bill sets up a council to oversee the system and to make sure that a foster child's odds of success in life are not so dependent on where he or she lives.

Three other freshly passed foster-care bills demand the governor's signature:

► AB2480 by Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, would ensure that foster youth have legal representation when dependency proceedings reach the appellate level. Currently, counsel is required only when requested by the child's trial attorney and there is a conflict of interest between the child and the county's lawyer.

► SB1641 by Sen. Nell Soto, D-Pomona, would lift some of the absurdly rigid state regulations that have become barriers to creating a family environment for foster youth — and discourage would-be foster parents from assuming the responsibility. Example: A foster youth cannot ever be left home alone, even for the parent to run a brief errand. Soto's bill would impose a more reason-

able "best meets the needs of the child" standard.

► AB2488 by Assemblyman Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, would lift some of the obstacles that prevent foster children from locating their siblings — one of the more common, and eminently understandable, cravings of someone who spent his or her youth being moved from home to home.

Schwarzenegger and legislators put a combined \$94 million extra for foster care into the coming year's budget. The danger is that the governor might try to declare "mission accomplished" and cite that increase as sufficient evidence of his commitment to foster care.

But the infusion of new money — welcome as it is — does not preclude the need to reform the system. If any-

thing, it intensifies the need to make sure those dollars are spent as efficiently and effectively as possible.

The stakes are excruciatingly high. Recent history suggests California's more than 80,000 foster children are at far higher risk of becoming homeless or incarcerated than advancing to college.

Any responsible parent whose children were in danger of living on the streets or falling into the criminal-justice system would do everything and anything within his or her power to provide a structure to steer them to the right path. Foster children are our collective responsibility. The outcomes of this failed system — with unacceptable numbers of youths entering adulthood without the skills or support systems they need — leave no doubt about the urgency for reform.

These four bills need to be signed into law.

Urge Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to sign these four bills to improve the lives of foster youth. E-mail him today at governor@governor.ca.gov. Our previous editorials on California's troubled foster-care system can be found under "Chronicle campaigns" at sfgate.com/opinion.



EDITORIAL

A false promise to foster youth

IF CALIFORNIA legislators and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger are serious about helping foster youth make the transition to adulthood, they need to do more than pour money into the bureaucracy.

They need to make sure that money is going to the young adults it is designed to help — when they need it most.

A case in point: The new state budget includes a \$5.7 million supplement to a federal program that provides grants of up to \$5,000 for emancipated foster youth to cover the costs of housing and other expenses when they go to college.

It's a compelling need. By definition, these former wards of the state lack the personal resources and family-support structure that is so essential in navigating higher education. Only about 2 percent of all former foster youth ever get a college degree. An 18-year-old leaving the foster-care system is many times more likely to become homeless or imprisoned than to earn a diploma in the following five years.



So, with September rents now overdue and classes having started more than two weeks ago on most campuses, how much of this money has actually reached the roughly 2,000 eligible foster youth in California colleges and universities?

Not a dime.

At the earliest, the first checks will be sent out in "mid-to-late October," said Diana Fuentes-Michel, executive director of the California Student Aid Commission, which administers what are known as "Chafee grants," after the late U.S. Sen. John Chafee, R-R.I., who championed the program to help young people ages 18-21 who are leaving foster care.

The excuses amount to classic bureaucratise. Fuentes-Michel insisted it's not the commission's fault — as of Thursday, she was still waiting for the state departments of Social Services and General Services to sign the "interagency agreements" to give the commission authorization to distribute the money.

"The timing of this program," she acknowledged, "is not in sync with the academic calendar."

That is an understatement. The distribution of funds has been so outrageously slow that some financially strapped students have given up and dropped out of school as a result, according to those who administer the money at the campus level. At Cal State University East Bay, the dozen students who were certified for Chafee grants in summer 2005 did not receive their checks until August 2006. Financial-aid administrators at City College of San Francisco and Laney College said many-months delays were not uncommon.

The frustration is statewide, said Minh Ngo-Gonzalez, director of the Silicon Valley Children's Fund, which runs a program to help 41 emancipated foster youth at 15 California colleges. She said "almost all" of those students received letters from the state last fall indicating they would get a Chafee grant — and counted on it as part of their financial-aid package — but none received a check before springtime. A few waited and waited, until they were finally notified — in the spring — that the program had run out of money and they would not get anything.

This bureaucratic dysfunction is worse than intolerable. It is



JOHN OLYN/ART/NewsArt.com

cruel.

Ngo-Gonzalez said state administrators had been assuring students that, with the extra state money, the problems had been fixed and the grants would be issued in a timely manner this year.

That promise is officially broken. Even a one-month delay is untenable for a student who is scrambling to come up with the money for food, apartment deposits and other basic expenses.

"It's not right, what's happening," Ngo-Gonzalez said. "If the federal or state government tells you they're going to do something, you expect them to do it."

Sarah Mejia, a 22-year-old single mother and full-time CCSF student, knows all about delays and bureaucratic snafus. A mix-up in government records left her without a Chafee grant in 2004-05, despite documented evidence of her years in foster care. Her eligibility was finally certified by the state at the start of school in late August 2005. Still, she did not receive her \$4,800 check until May 2006.

Mejia is livid at all the bureaucratic finger-pointing in Sacramento.

"At the end of the day, they get to go to their big homes, sit by their warm fires, enjoy their cappuccinos and watch their plasma TVs," said Mejia, who, at 22, is no longer eligible for the grants that came late one year and not at all in the other. "They're insulated from the conditions that me and other people who are counting on these grants have to live with."

Assemblywoman Karen Bass, a Baldwin Vista Democrat who has taken a lead role in advocating for foster youth, said legislators had two objectives in adding \$5.7 million to the Chafee grant program. One was to make sure that all eligible students could obtain the grants. (Last year, there were twice as many applicants as there were available dollars to fully fund the

Students waited for \$5,000 grants that came late — or, in some cases, not at all.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2006

grants). The other goal was to alleviate one big excuse for the delay in getting the money to the students — the fact that the federal fiscal year, which will bring \$7.9 million in Chafee grants to this state, does not begin until Oct. 1. The state fiscal year begins in July, thus, theoretically, allowing the state money to flow in time for the school year.

Bass was none too pleased to learn the state bureaucracy was not going to be getting money to the eligible students until mid-October at the earliest.

"What you've brought to my attention is that this is still a problem," Bass said in a telephone interview Wednesday. "For a middle-class kid, this (type of delay in financial aid) means you borrow from your parents. For a foster kid, this could mean you are on the streets."

In most other forms of financial aid, standard practice is to ensure that students know exactly what they will be receiving — and, in many cases, have checks in hand — before the first day of class.

Consider the plight of a newly emancipated foster youth entering CSU East Bay. Even if a student were to receive a maximum \$4,600 Pell grant — the main source of financial aid for the lowest-income students — the math of higher education is daunting. On-campus room-and-board runs \$8,400 a year. A \$5,000 Chafee grant could make or break a college opportunity for a freshman without parents, credit or connections.

"These are probably the most disadvantaged group we serve," said Rhonda Johnson, financial aid director at CSU East Bay. "You can imagine the impact of having to wait for any type of financial aid."

California legislators this year made foster care a higher priority than it has been in memory — including the addition of \$5.7 million for the Chafee grants. Their most significant move toward reform was the passage of AB2216, authored by Assembly members Bass and Bill Maze, R-Visalia, to set up a council to oversee this state's severely disjointed system for caring for the 80,000-plus foster children that are our collective responsibility. The bungling of the Chafee grants is a perfect example of why the state needs a commission to oversee the system and outlay of dollars, as AB2216 proposes. Schwarzenegger must sign this bill — for the sake of taxpayers and for the sake of young people who are being shortchanged by the state government's disorganization and inattention.

"One of my greatest fears is that we will do this work and the implementation will fall short," Bass said of this year's strides in foster-care reform.

Enough of the bureaucratic excuses. The emancipated foster youth who have enrolled in college — overcoming tall odds in pursuit of their dreams — deserve the support of the promises the state has made to them. The Chafee program must be realigned so that these grants reach students before the first day of classes — before they purchase their books, before they have to arrange child care or buy groceries, before the rent is due. We will stay with this issue until the problem is fixed.

Urge Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to intervene in this bureaucratic logjam that is delaying Chafee grants — and encourage him to sign AB2216 to make all foster-care programs more efficient and effective. E-mail him at governor@governor.ca.gov.



SFGate —
► You can view our past editorials on foster care by clicking on "Chronicle campaigns" at sfgate.com/opinion.

EDITORIALS

Checks en route to foster students

HELP IS on the way to nearly 2,000 former foster youths who have been waiting for the state to come through with promised scholarships of up to \$5,000 to help with college living expenses.

This was supposed to be the year the state stepped in with an extra \$5.7 million to make sure that all eligible students could receive the grants and that they could have their initial checks in hand at the start of the school year. In years past, the federally funded "Chafee grant" program was notoriously slow — so slow that most California applicants who received such scholarships last year did not get them until this spring. Others were notified late in the school year that the program had run out of money.

But as we reported here Friday, the state bureaucracy had not been responding with the sense of urgency that legislators expected when they put extra money into this program to help these young people absorb the financial shock of going to college without parental support. As of last week, the California Student Aid Commission had insisted the earliest it could possibly finish reviewing applications and issuing checks was mid-to-late October.

By Friday afternoon, however, the bureaucratic barriers were crumbling. Key legislators started pressing for explanations on the holdup. "As soon as your editorial hit, they started circling the wagons," said Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata. "We just drilled in." One of the state departments (General Services) that had been sitting on the paperwork suddenly had it signed and on its way to another involved agency, the Department of Social Services.

By yesterday, all three state agencies with a hand in the process — the administration of this program is far more cumbersome than it needs to be — had completed their work and put in a request for state Controller Steve Westly's office to process the first 500 grants on an expedited track.

"We will gladly do what we can to get these out ASAP," said Russ Lopez, the controller's spokesman. He said the checks would be sent out today.

"That's just fabulous," said Minh Ngo-Gonzalez, director of the Silicon Valley Children's Fund, which runs a program to help 41 emancipated foster youth at 15 California colleges.

Still, Ngo-Gonzalez worries about

the fate of eligible students who are not in the first wave of grants — especially considering the delays and lack of communication in the past. "Students are left wondering: What will I get and when?" she said.

Juan Centeno, a 19-year-old emancipated foster youth studying computer science at City College of San Francisco, has good reason to be wary. Last year, he was assured in September he was eligible for a maximum \$5,000 scholarship. He kept waiting for a follow-up letter or phone call from the state — if even to say "we're sorry" or "thanks for waiting."

It never came.

"At first I was calling (his CCSF financial aid adviser) every week ... then every two weeks ... then every month," Centeno said. He eventually gave up.

He applied again this year, but he is not likely to be among the early recipients of checks. In a cruel

extra twist for the students such as Centeno who were stifled last year, the state is giving priority to the processing of renewal applications.

"Let's say I don't trust the people that award these grants," Centeno said. "I'm not going to worry about it anymore, because I don't want to create frustration for another person and I don't want to frustrate myself."

As Ngo-Gonzalez suggested, eligible students who do not receive checks right away — more than 750 supposedly have been delayed due to incomplete applications — should be kept informed of their status. These are young people who are overcoming long odds to pursue higher education. Only about 2 percent of all former foster youth ever earn a college degree.

The past week's acceleration of the process, while certainly welcome, proves there was no excuse for the delays. The California Legislature must streamline this laudable, but poorly administered, program so that one state agency is responsible for ensuring that students are getting their grants at the start of the school year.

"It will be fixed," vowed Senate leader Perata. "We're not going to go through this again."

"We'll be watching."

Links to our past editorials on California's foster-care system can be found under "Chronicle campaign" at sfgate.com/opinion.



FOLLOWING UP

"This bureaucratic dysfunction is worse than intolerable. It is cruel."

EDITORIAL, SEPT. 15, 2006

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2006

EDITORIALS

Governor to sign foster-care bills

GOV. Arnold Schwarzenegger today will sign eight bills designed to make a difference in the lives of tens of thousands of foster children in California.

The most significant of the bills, AB2216 by Assembly member Karen

Bass, D-Baldwin Hills, would force the state to finally acknowledge and address the vast disparities in the living conditions and access to services for foster youth in the state's 58 counties.

"We viewed this as the linchpin for making the system work better," said Miriam Krinsky, executive director of the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles, which represents thousands of foster youth and has been pressing hard for reform.

By any measure, the system has been failing these children. Nearly a third become homeless within a year of emancipating, or "aging out," at 18. One in five is incarcerated.

The state's record keeping and standards are so slipshod and so inconsistent from county to county that the state only recently — under pressure from the federal government — started keeping track of how many foster children died and why. One advocacy group, collecting data from counties, just determined that 50 foster children died in the state last year.

In revealing the governor's intent to sign AB2216, Health and Human Services Secretary Kim Bešhé said the landmark reform bill would provide an "important collaborative mechanism" to bring more consistency and accountability to the foster-care system. It requires state and local agencies handling the various foster-care programs to communicate with each other, with the goal of identifying and expanding best practices. It also sets up a council — co-chaired by the Human Services secretary and the chief justice of the state Supreme Court — to oversee the system.

"We would be hard pressed to fo-

cus on a population more worthy of our attention and resources than the children in foster care and those at risk" of being placed outside the home, said Bešhé, noting that foster care was cited as a priority in the governor's first budget.

She credited a bipartisan push on behalf of foster children with creating the atmosphere that produced more than \$100 million in new state funding and the eight bills that Schwarzenegger plans to sign today.

Those bills will mean the state's 75,000 foster children will now be guaranteed legal representation in dependency proceedings through the appellate level (AB2480 by Assemblywoman NoREEN EVANS, D-Santa Rosa), provided with a better chance at a family environment by easing some of the rigid regulations that discourage would-be foster parents from taking on the responsibility (SB1641 by Sen. NELL SOTO, D-Pomona), given fewer bureaucratic hurdles when they try to locate their siblings (AB2488 by Assemblyman MARK LENO, D-San Francisco) and protected from identity theft (AB2985 by Assemblyman BILL MAZE, R-Visalia).

As Schwarzenegger noted in a letter to Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez in May, California has an "obligation to act" in response to the "sobering statistics" about what is happening to these children — to our children, our collective responsibility.

"We tried to craft legislation that would have an immediate impact on people's lives," said Bass, who emerged as the Legislature's champion of the foster-care cause.

In a bold and bipartisan way, California legislators delivered an unprecedented combination of funds and laws to upgrade the foster-care system.

"Although we may disagree on many issues, we were very happy to come together to protect California's most vulnerable children," Bass said.

Schwarzenegger's bill signings today will put the finishing touches on a remarkable year.



FOLLOWING UP

"For too long, California has failed — and continues to fail — in its obligation to provide homes and hope to tens of thousands of children in its foster-care system. Further disabling the disjointed and underfunded system is a silo-type structure with standards that vary widely from county to county."

EDITORIAL, SEPT. 11, 2005

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2006

EDITORIALS

A model for all

THE COUNTRY'S best model for foster-care services may be in a Napa office park.

When we first wrote about VOICES (Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support) one year ago, it was a fledgling community center with a coalition of government and nonprofit agencies, eight teenage members and a couple of big ideas. At the time, those ideas sounded outlandish: they wanted to gather the various agencies that dealt with foster care under one roof, and the teens wanted to start their own programs in housing and life skills.

But they're doing it. In fact, they're doing it so well that adults all around the country are asking them for advice.

"The first time we went to a national conference where we were the highlight speakers, I looked around at all the experts and realized how awesome it was," said Mitch Findley, 19, a founding member. "It made me feel like I know what I'm doing, too."

The center now runs six programs and serves approximately 150 current and emancipated foster youth ages 16-24. That's no small achievement, considering that in any one year there are only 142 foster children in Napa County.

How did they do it? For starters, they were successful in reaching out for help. All the community agencies agreed to locate a staff member in the VOICES office part-time, and community foundations and nonprofits (17 of them) pitched in with money and assistance. Their own experience as foster children gave them a fresh perspective on how to conduct outreach and service. Because they were foster children themselves, the staff has brought a new perspective to the ideas of outreach and service. (For example, they set up an office at a local alternative school for a month and got 33 new members.)

From there, it was all improvisation — and faith.

"I'm a single mom. When I got here in February, I asked them why they didn't have any programs for young parents," said 20-year-old Amber McCurdy, a program coordinator. "So they said, well, start one. I figured it out as I went along." Now she leads an eight-week program teaching other young parents about nutrition, toddler development and relationships — and has discovered that she's a good enough public speaker to give presentations all around the country.

Foster youth set up program to help each other.

"I've never seen a business depend so much on the commitment of youth," said Nikkie Felten, an 18-year-old founding member.

"It's really different. And so many of us have changed for the better, because we've taken on responsibilities, because we're role models now."

Whether or not the VOICES model can be replicated — in larger, less cooperative areas — is an open question, but it's what the staff is planning to tackle next. Executive director Leslie Medine said that there are two crucial things that made VOICES work: commitment from the community and commitment to a youth-led project.

"We had to find really great kids, and we were lucky enough to work in an area with service agencies that cooperated not only with us, but with each other," Medine said. "I don't know if that's the case in some of the larger cities. San Francisco might have better luck by starting small — in, say, a neighborhood — and then spreading out." With two grants for them to study the possibility of spreading VOICES to other communities, these hard-working young people have a tremendous amount to celebrate.

We salute them as they celebrate their one-year anniversary tonight.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2006

EDITORIAL | On foster care reform

Why are these children dying?

THE STATE OF California cannot say how many foster children die each year, even though a state law that took effect in 2004 requires counties to release the names, dates of birth, and dates of death for these children. The new law is not being followed by all: The Children's Advocacy Institute, a San Diego-based research and lobbying group that co-sponsored the 2004 law, requested the names for 2005 from all 58 counties. Nearly a year later, they're still waiting for two counties to respond.

The names that they do have for 2005 — 48 so far — offer more questions than answers. What does it mean, for example, that nine of the deaths were children age 17 or older, five of whom were within six weeks of their 18th birthday? Are 17-year-olds simply more likely to get in car accidents? Suffer drug overdoses? Skateboard without helmets? Or does it mean the fulfillment of our worst fears — that some children, facing the harsh realities of homelessness and desperation when they "age out" of the system at 18, are taking their own lives instead?

"There's no way to get more information without going to the courts," said Christina Riehl, staff attorney for the Children's Advocacy Institute.

There is absolutely no reason why an advocacy group, a newspaper, an elected official, or any other concerned member of the public should have to go to court to find out what happened when a foster youth dies.

But due to California's baffling policies on

disclosure, it's extraordinarily difficult for the public to learn who in the system is dying and why. Nearly every bill that has come through the Legislature in the past several years has been stonewalled by the County Welfare Directors' Association.

Take AB1817, a very modest bill sponsored by Assemblyman Bill Maze, R-Visalia, three years ago. Concerned about a wave of foster children's deaths in his district, Maze simply wanted legislators to be allowed to review the case files of deceased children in the system. But he couldn't get his bill out of the Judiciary Committee.

"They said that, as an elected official, I'd just use these cases as a political forum," said Maze. "I think it's just baloney. We need to know if there's some kind of pattern or trend or lack of oversight in case management, because, until we know that, we won't know how to fix the problem. But needless to say, I've been fought against on this issue tremendously by the welfare directors of this state."

Maze is not the only one frustrated by the lack of information about child deaths from California's social-services bureaucracies. Last year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services determined that the state was violating federal law by failing to file reports about the deaths and near-deaths of children due to abuse or neglect. Threatened with the loss of \$60 million in child-welfare funds, this summer the state began requiring counties to file these reports. But — and here's the rub — the Department of Social Services keeps all names confidential, even in

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the case of foster children.

Imagine — our state's most vulnerable children, betrayed by a state system that was supposed to protect them — and we have no idea who they are. A look at the questionnaires the state started providing this July offer only haunting glimpses of their fates:

► On July 30, a 15-year-old foster child died after either jumping or being pushed from a moving car in a suspected sexual assault.

► On Aug. 17, a 2-year-old foster child drowned after her foster parents left her alone in a bath tub.

► On Aug. 24, a 16-year-old committed suicide by shooting himself in the head after telling his sibling that he couldn't take their legal guardian's abuse anymore.

Confidentiality is important, especially when it comes to protecting the identities of family members and abuse reporters. We understand, as well, that it's important to protect the names of abused children who suffer near-fatalities but are expected to recover. But there are no good reasons why the full case files — including names, counties and histories — for dead foster children shouldn't be open to all of us. There can't be any accountability without transparency.

When we asked Sue Diedrich, assistant general counsel for the state Department of Social Services, why they couldn't tell us more, she said that the state could risk its federal funding.

That's simply not true, according to a federal official who tracks the issue.

"Federal law doesn't require that a state release (those details), but it doesn't prohibit those disclosures either," said Susan Orr, associate commissioner of the children's bureau in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Indeed, there are at least two states, Georgia and South Carolina,

There are no good reasons why the case files for dead foster children shouldn't be open.

which offer up just the sort of connect-the-dots information that an informed public needs — and unlike California, they haven't had any threats of a funding cut-off.

There is a solution to this, and this year Assembly members Sharon Runner and Karen Bass even tried to offer it. It was AB2938, which required the release of juvenile court records, and county and state files, in the case of a child death pertaining to abuse or neglect. AB2938 should be expanded to include the deaths of foster children, regardless of whether or not they died as a result of abuse or neglect.

Unfortunately, although the governor and Legislature worked together to pass many important pieces of child-welfare legislation this year, AB2938 wasn't one of them. The county welfare directors' association voiced its opposition again, and it didn't go past its first committee.

For some reason, there are still people who seem to believe that if we don't get the information, we won't pay attention to the fact that our children are dying.

They're wrong. It's time to resurrect — and expand — AB2938. What we don't know *can* hurt us. It's unconscionable to let children pay the price.

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*These deaths drew news coverage.
But we need to know what happened
whenever a foster youth dies.*

Conrad Morales

When Conrad Morales' relatives sent him to live with his aunt and uncle in the mountainside town of Randle, Wash., they thought they were providing him with a better life.

After spending his first 11 years in Los Angeles motels with his mother or relatives' homes in La Puente, the idea was that the boy might benefit from forests, meadows, fresh air, animals — from the concept of an innocent childhood that his parents, both of whom had spent time in jail on drug and assault charges, hadn't been able to provide for him.

Two years later, the police pulled Conrad's body out of a trash can.

The suspects in his murder case are the very same aunt and uncle who were supposed to shelter and protect him. The boy — a high-spirited, popular student and avid bird-watcher — told his best friend weeks before his death during the summer of 2005 that he was being sexually abused and beaten. Now that best friend — and the entire town of Randle — is still wondering how they could have failed to miss the warning signs: the filthy house, the erratic school attendance, Conrad's requests for make-up to cover the bruises on his face and neck.

Months before his death, Conrad began making desperate calls to his older sister, Vanessa Gallardo, in the Los Angeles area. Gallardo, who had already fought unsuccessfully for custody with Los Angeles County Child Protective Services, was perhaps the only one who called social workers and asked that someone check on the boy. She never found out about that check, but the police estimate he was killed weeks before they received a missing person's report.

Kayla Lorrain Wood

The life of Kayla Lorrain Wood has a made-for-after-school-TV-special quality to it: She was sexually abused, schizophrenic and depressed. She bounced around in Child Protective Services while her mother racked up drug charges. She was suspected of prostitution. And she died a terrible death — this September, the Moreno Valley police discovered her stabbed and abandoned body after firefighters came to put out a fire in a building where transients gathered.

But beneath this tale of woe lies a 16-year-old girl who loved art, music and animals. Tall and thin, she dreamed of becoming a model — an appropriate choice, perhaps, for a young woman who her mother describes as girly, pretty and frilly. In her foster-care placements, she ran away frequently — to find her family.

Eventually, the police found her body instead.

Could anyone have saved her? In 2005, after an evaluation showed that Kayla was suffering from a mental disorder, Child Protective Services recommended that she be committed to a secure psychiatric facility. She ran away from her group home four days later. Though she later returned, no one followed up on the recommendation.

Although Kayla went missing at least 10 times during her two years in the foster-care system, social services admitted to losing contact with her parents. They didn't know she was missing until she was already dead.

Jerry Hulsey

The life and death of Jerry Hulsey shows how difficult it is for social workers to make the right calls when it comes to protecting children — and how important it is that they do.

Jerry's biological mother and father were habitual drug users. His first brush with the Department of Social Services came at the age of nine months, when his biological mother passed out from a heroin overdose with him in the car. She was charged with child endangerment and ordered into drug treatment, where she met Vicki Lynn Hulsey, Jerry's future foster mother.

Though his biological mother couldn't stay out of trouble — she didn't complete her treatment program and left her son in the care of anyone who would take him — she did notice that Hulsey treated the boy well. So when she went to prison in 1996, she asked that he be left in Hulsey's care in Monterey.

Hulsey acted quickly to be certified as Jerry's foster parent, and by the accounts of friends and neighbors, treated him with love. When she petitioned for adoption, social workers weighed that more heavily than Hulsey's other problems — namely, her background as a child-abuse survivor, her struggles with drug and alcohol addiction, and her bipolar disorder. In the end, Hulsey's past caught up with her — she beat 10-year-old Jerry to death this year. An autopsy showed that he had cocaine in his system and that, at 4 feet 9 inches, he weighed 60 pounds.

Hulsey's deterioration and Jerry's tragic death shows how difficult it is to predict what will happen in an adoption. But it also shows how important it is for the public to understand social workers' choices.

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It works in South Carolina

FORMORE than 10 years, South Carolina has had one of the nation's strongest policies about public disclosure for the deaths of foster children. South Carolina's clear and succinct policies stand in stark contrast to California's confusing and disjointed disclosure system.

"We review all the records and talk about what the agency did or didn't do in a specific case — was there a failure to make a home visit? Did someone not follow a policy concerning documentation?" said Virginia Williamson, general counsel for South Carolina's Department of Social Services. "The reports talk about agency activities instead of laying out the family's dynamics or revealing information about siblings or other relatives."

A public request yields plenty of information. They sent us a document containing summary information about the circumstances of death for children who died in 2004. The document included not just children who had died of suspected abuse or neglect while in active protection, but also children whose deaths were the result of accidents or natural causes and received no public attention. By listing this last group without names, their privacy is protected — but the public can still do comparisons.

Composed in a simple, clear format, each entry is easy to read and analyze. For example, we learned that in 2004, there were nine child deaths due to abuse and neglect while in active protection, one well-publicized child death due to homicide, and 28 accident- and natural cause-deaths. Of the nine abuse

and neglect deaths, one was a foster child — La-keysha Tharp, a 10-year-old in Richland County, of probable asphyxiation. We

learn that the foster mother has been charged with homicide by child abuse, and that the foster mother's son (unnamed, because he is a minor) has been charged with the murder as well.

It's all there: the case, the lost child, and what's being done to ensure that her death was not in vain. And the sky hasn't fallen in South Carolina as a result of such disclosure. If they're worried about "privacy," or "liability" or "politics," the excuses that certain authorities offer in California, it hasn't stopped law enforcement from serving or social services from protecting. Nor has it stopped the public from carrying on with their private lives. The only difference is that the public also has the knowledge to ask questions and push for improvement.

"It's always a delicate balance between being accountable to the public for how we do business, the privacy interests of families, and protecting the state from lawsuits," said Williamson. "But ultimately we feel that transparency and accountability are important."

So do we.

About the series

California legislators and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger made progress this year by approving a series of measures to upgrade the level of consistency and oversight in the state's troubled foster care system — but there is much work to be done.

Today's editorials were researched and written by editorial writer Caille Millner. You can e-mail her at cmillner@sfgate.com.

To read earlier editorials on this topic, go to SFGate.com.

— John Diaz, editorial page editor
jdiaz@sfgate.com



It takes a family

FOR ALL of the rhetoric about "family values" in American politics, the federal government certainly puts up a lot of obstacles to allowing foster youth to live with their family members.

There are many reasons why the government should be helping relatives — most typically grandparents — who are willing to open their homes to a child whose parents are either unwilling or unable to provide a stable home. Various studies have shown that young people in a relative's care fare far better in life — as measured by education, employment and incarceration rates — than those who are bounced from placement to placement in the foster-care system. Also, those relatives are far more likely than a stranger or a group-home "parent" to continue emotional and financial support when a youth becomes 18.

"You 'age out' of a system, but you don't age out of a family," observed Donna Butts, director of Generations United, a national family-advocacy group that has been pushing for reform of the federal foster-care rules.

The underlying flaw in federal law is a financing structure that encourages the placement of children in foster care instead of with relative guardians. More than 500,000 U.S. children are in a foster-care system that is severely underfunded in most states.

The upshot is that the money (in terms of monthly support payments and services such as drug treatment or mental-health counseling) does not follow the child when he or she moves from foster care into the home of a grandparent or other relative.

U.S. Sens. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., and Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, have just re-introduced legislation to rectify that problem by giving states the option to provide monthly support payments to grandparents and other relatives.

Their "Kinship Caregiver Support Act" also requires the state to notify grandparents and other adult relatives within 60 days of a child's removal from parental custody — and to lay out the options for the relative who might be willing to care for the child.

U.S. Rep. Danny Davis, a Chicago Democrat, plans to introduce soon a similar measure in the House. Davis has seen the heartache and stress on relatives struggling to keep siblings together.

"In some neighborhoods in my district, half of the children are living with grandparents," Davis said.

The reality is that many of those grandparents can barely afford their own living expenses — but they take in the children anyway, out of love and obligation. He believes the federal government should "ease the burden" and "provide additional rights" to these relatives.

In California, the state and counties have tried to navigate around the federal restrictions with programs such as "Kin-GAP," which uses a blend of state, county and other federal resources to help out relative caregivers. Still, it's not nearly enough money to make up for the federal restrictions.

San Francisco has been able to place more than half of its 2,000 foster youth with relative caregivers — but at a cost to the city of "several million dollars a year" because of the federal funding restrictions, said Trent Rhorer, the city's human services director.

Passage of the Clinton-Snowe bill would "send a very important message to the system as a whole across the country that the federal government recognizes that permanency is important for kids," Rhorer said.

Another problem with the federal rules is that they impose the same standards on relative caregivers that they apply to strangers who take foster care kids into their homes. Again, this is a policy that might sound sensible at first blush, but be-

comes impractical in the world of a low-income grandparent, who has taken another child into the house. For example, the federal rules would not allow three children — even siblings — to share a room. A relative with a criminal record — even a 20-year-old DUI offense — would be disqualified from federal caregiver support.

State and county officials and advocates for foster youth have long been frustrated at what they see as "perverse incentives" in federal rules that keep children in the transitional system when they might otherwise find a permanent home.

"If we can't get them home, we should at least get them to someone who shares a blood relation when we can," said Miriam Krinsky, a policy director for the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles.

Passage of the Clinton-Snowe bill would be a good start toward instilling "family values" in this nation's child-welfare policies.



Our past editorials on foster care can be found under "Chronicle campaigns" at sfgate.com/opinion.

