

California's foster children need more legal funding under Trump

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Photo: Brant Ward, The Chronicle

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The process of making California's state budget requires legislators to make many compromises. Unfortunately, one group whose needs have too often been compromised by the budget process are foster children.

That can't be allowed to happen this year. Foster children's advocacy groups are pleading with Sacramento to increase state funding for dependency attorneys.

Once children enter the foster care system, nearly every decision about their lives — from their medications to their possibilities for family reunification — are made in court. Dependency counsel are the lawyers who represent these abused and neglected children within an impersonal and complex legal system.

Like many public interest lawyers, dependency attorneys are overworked and underpaid. The difference is that the clients who suffer from these staggering caseloads are the children whose care all Californians have the responsibility to protect.

Their caseloads can run as high as 300 child clients in California. A 2016 recommendation from the Judicial Council recommends a maximum caseload of 141 clients.

The Judicial Council had requested a \$33.1 million funding increase, and the Legislature has acknowledged that this full amount is what's actually necessary. Over the past three years, both the Assembly and the state Senate have included increases that would total \$33 million over three years. The only amount to survive the budget conference process, sadly, was an \$11 million increase in 2015.

The Legislature's failure to pass the funding increase it knows California's children need so badly is shameful. It can't happen again this year.

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