

**On Foster Care**  
**Resolutions for our collective children**

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The beginning of a new year marks not simply the passage of time, but also an opportunity for reflection. It is a time to take stock of the past year's accomplishments as well as unfinished business, and to plan for the year to come. The end of 2006 enables us to close the door on our failings and affords us a fresh start.

As parents, the new year also compels us to reflect on how we've attended to the needs of our children -- to assess how our children are faring and where we can and should be endeavoring to provide better guidance or support. Our resolutions inevitably include a promise to do better, try harder and devote more time to our children in the coming year.

Too often, however, the abused and neglected foster children we collectively "parent" in our state play no part of our yearly self-assessment and have no place in our list of new year's resolutions. We fail to ask how these children have fared in the year past or what they most need in the year ahead.

As we take stock at the close of 2006 on behalf of the more than 75,000 children and youth in California's foster-care system, there are many positive advancements for which we should rightfully take pride, and much more that we must accomplish in the year to come. This past year brought significant legislation and new resources to address many of the challenges facing struggling children and families in our state.

One of the most critical bills enacted into law, AB2216 (Bass) creates a Child Welfare Council to improve collaboration among all the state agencies that serve foster children. This leadership body will provide a unique opportunity to bring together the many agencies, departments, courts and stakeholders that impact the lives of children and thereby avoid the piecemeal parenting that too often is the norm. The council will enable California to be a national leader on institutionalizing a collaborative leadership structure.

As this new climate for collaborative leadership is forged, however, it is critical that the many arms of the courts and government that will be a part of the newly formed council are an engaged part of turning this ambitious law into reality for our state's most vulnerable children. A deliberate and planned process will provide the greatest chance for long-term efficacy and success of the council.

Nothing worthwhile happens for free, however. This past year saw an additional \$83 million to address some of the critical needs facing our

foster-care system. This additional money will be used for reduced social worker caseloads, support for relative caregivers, transitional programs, dependency drug courts and systemic improvements - all long overdue initiatives. Many existing challenges, especially those facing youth aging out of foster care, remain and will require further investment.

Leadership for all of these positive steps sprang from several fronts. The bipartisan California Legislative Select Committee on Children in Foster Care, chaired by Assembly member Karen Bass, D- Baldwin Vista (Los Angeles County) provided a forum to discuss, review and debate public policy on the child welfare system. Assembly member Bass and the committee underscored that these are all our children; they can and must be part of our daily, monthly and yearly planning.

Our courts have also put a spotlight on the need for reform of our foster-care system. With the support and leadership of California's Chief Justice Ronald M. George, Administrative Director of the Courts William C. Vickrey and the Center for Families, Children & the Court -- led by Diane Nunn -- this past year saw the creation of a new Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care. The commission, chaired by Justice Carlos Moreno, is hard at work and will start to issue recommendations this coming year on improving the ability of courts to move children quickly out of the legal limbo of foster care into safe, permanent homes.

If real change is to take place, however, we need to take a national look at these issues. Flexibility in allocating federal funds where they can do the most good needs to be incorporated into federal funding mechanisms instead of relying on the perverse requirement that compels removing children from the home and breaking up struggling families before federal monies can be tapped.

Last year was a year of significant accomplishment on behalf of California's foster youth. Things are unquestionably moving a better direction. But better is far from good enough. Let's all resolve to do our best to ensure that our most vulnerable children will have in the coming year what all children deserve -- a safe, stable and loving home.

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