



IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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New Project to Address Foster Youth Mental Health Needs

LOS ANGELES, CA – The Children's Law Center of Los Angeles (CLC) announced today the establishment of a Foster Youth Mental Health Initiative. This project, generously funded by The California Endowment, is aimed at generating lasting changes in the delivery of mental health services to abused and neglected children living in our foster care system.

“Too often foster children fail to receive mental health services until their situation reaches a crisis, and extreme or harmful behavior occurs.” said CLC Executive Director Miriam Krinsky. “Even when care is provided, a lack of coordination among the child welfare system, mental health providers, schools, and the court results in fragmented provision of services and children who already have the fewest defenses are paying the price for an inadequate system.”

Already vulnerable children may endure lifelong problems due to the system's breakdown in attending to their needs. One former foster youth observed, “We never got any counseling. We were embarrassed by the abuse we suffered. My brothers and sisters felt it was their fault. It's only now, many years later, that I can begin to understand what happened.”

The CLC Foster Youth Mental Health Initiative will bring attention to the mental health needs of this at-risk population, begin to craft recommendations for system change, and work toward implementation of new approaches on a state and local level. Director of the Foster Youth Mental Health Initiative, Garrison Smith, opined: “It's time for the systems entrusted to help our children to come together and take an honest look at how the system has tragically failed our children. No foster youth should ever have to go without timely, appropriate and evidence-based mental health interventions. The status quo is unacceptable.”

Smith's comments echo recommendations from the nonpartisan Pew Commission on Foster Care, whose roadmap for reform of the nation's foster care system includes a call for greater collaboration among organizations who serve foster youth, better information and tracking of cases, and an enhanced role by the court in ensuring safety, permanence and well-being for foster children.

“Los Angeles County DCFS has responsibility for a high proportion of children in California's child welfare system,” observed Gwen Foster, Senior Program Officer for the California Endowment. “The California Endowment invested in the Foster Care Youth Initiative to encourage more intensive policy and practice action in Los Angeles County to make sure that these young people have easier access to coordinated, culturally competent, preventive health and mental health services.”

The Foster Youth Mental Health Initiative will span three years. The first year will bring together key players to identify barriers and begin to craft solutions. CLC will lead a collaborative, multi-agency advisory group to plan a summit in May, 2006. It is hoped this summit will help forge relationships and identify areas where immediate changes can be implemented.

The next step will be to develop practice guidelines that deal with assessment protocols and identification of effective interventions. Under the current structure, for example, there is no systematic approach to determining when a child should receive a mental health assessment and services are lacking to attend to problems identified when assessments are done.

The Foster Youth Mental Health Initiative will create an interdisciplinary team structured to promote better collaboration among the organizations involved with foster youth and to develop proactive solutions so that foster youth are better prepared for a healthy and productive future.

For more information about the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles and the Foster Youth Mental Health Initiative, visit www.clcla.org.

Children's Law Center of Los Angeles is a nonprofit, public interest law corporation whose 185 person staff of lawyers, paralegals and investigator/social workers serve as the "voice" in the foster care system for the vast majority of children under the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles dependency court.