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Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
Kern County Administrative Center
1115 Truxtun Avenue, 5th Floor
Bakersfield, California 93301
Telephone (661) 868-3585
TTY Relay 800-735-2929

March 9, 2026

The Honorable Corey Jackson, Chair
Assembly Budget
Subcommittee No. 2
1021 O Street, Room 8230
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Caroline Menjivar, Chair
Senate Budget & Fiscal Review
Subcommittee No. 3
1021 O Street, Suite 6630
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Concerns with the Governor's 2026-27 Budget Proposal - Child Welfare Services

Dear Senator Menjivar and Assemblymember Jackson,

I am writing on behalf of Kern County Board of Supervisors to respectfully request your support for funding to continue the existing Child Welfare Emergency Response (ER) Enhancement Program in Fiscal Year (FY) 2026-27 and for a two-year extension of the existing Flexible Family Supports funding scheduled to sunset on June 30, 2026.

Continuing these investments is critical to stabilizing California's child welfare social work workforce and strengthening child protection and prevention systems that support child safety, stability for foster children/youth in family-based care with priority for kin and kin-like care, and permanent connections to families. These investments are needed in light of H.R. 1 changes that may undermine concrete support to families, increase the risk of child welfare involvement, and impact bridge implementation of the new Tiered Rate Structure.

Emergency Response Stabilization Funding

Emergency Response (ER) is the frontline of California's child protection system, where social workers investigate allegations of abuse and neglect, assess child safety, and intervene during family crises. Although overall caseloads have declined, the acuity and complexity of cases have increased significantly, requiring more intensive engagement and cross-system coordination.

Recent one-time ER Enhancement funds have improved response timeliness and stabilized staffing, while also strengthening early safety planning, Child and Family Team (CFT) engagement, diversion efforts, and kin-first practice to prevent unnecessary foster care entry. However, these funds expire on June 30, 2026.

Without continued support for at least one additional year, counties will face diminished response capacity, renewed workforce instability, and reduced prevention effectiveness as H.R. 1's impacts on food and health programs take effect. **We respectfully urge approval of \$20 million General Fund in FY 2026–27 to sustain ER stabilization efforts** statewide and preserve front-end prevention capacity during implementation of H.R. 1. This funding will enable counties to retain staffing to work with vulnerable families, prevent foster care entry, and connect families to community- and county-based services that meet their basic needs and help reduce unnecessary disproportionate child welfare system-involvement of families and children of color.

To date, ER Enhancement Funds have made a significant difference in our county's ability to meet federal and state mandates while also supporting improved outcomes for children, youth, and families. These funds have allowed the County to hire and retain additional ER social workers and expand our after-hours on-call program, increasing our capacity to respond to child abuse and neglect referrals. As a result, the County has improved investigation timeliness, reduced referral backlogs, and strengthened kin-first diversion efforts, allowing more children to be safely placed with relatives at the earliest opportunity. These investments have also improved workforce stability by reducing burnout among after-hours staff and significantly lowering the ER vacancy rate from 19.7 percent to 5.97 percent. Continued support for ER Enhancement funding is critical to sustaining these gains and ensuring counties can respond effectively to the needs of vulnerable children and families. Continued stabilization of ER is critical to maintaining child safety and prevention capacity.

Flexible Family Supports, Two-Year Extension

Flexible Family Supports funding has provided county child welfare agencies with the ability to address immediate, concrete barriers to promote placement stability and support placements with relatives and other family-based caregivers. The funds are used to deliver concrete supports not typically available through other existing funding sources. This funding is also scheduled to sunset on June 30, 2026.

County child welfare agencies have used this funding to enable children entering foster care to immediately be cared for by kin-based caregivers through the provision of beds, minor home repairs, safety modifications such as pool fencing, and short-term rental or utility payment assistance. Many counties have utilized the funds to provide respite care for family caregivers, including kin, to prevent disruption from their family-based setting and reduce caregiver stress, while some have used the funds to support the costs of travel and enrollment into enrichment and normalcy activities, including helping foster youth maintain their tribal and sibling connections. Positive outcomes included improved well-being for foster children and youth, maintaining family-based care and avoiding need for short-term residential (congregate) care, and reduced burnout and higher retention of family-based caregivers.

In Kern County, Flexible Family Supports funding is primarily used to remove barriers to placement with relatives, maintain and support relative placements, provide respite for caregivers to promote placement stability, and increase visitation opportunities to strengthen and preserve birth family relationships. Through these resources, children have been successfully placed with relatives who otherwise would not have been able to meet placement requirements, while also providing support that stabilize those

placements and help ensure children remain safely connected to family. Flexible Family Supports have also enabled the County to promote and maintain meaningful relationships with birth families even when children are not placed with relatives. If this funding sunsets, Kern County anticipates a reduction in relative placements due to the financial challenges many relatives face in meeting resource family approval standards, such as installing required safety features like pool fencing or securing adequate living space to accommodate a child. Additionally, without these supportive services, placements may become more vulnerable to disruption, increasing the likelihood that children will experience placement instability and potentially enter higher levels of care.

We respectfully request a two-year extension of Flexible Family Supports funding beyond June 30, 2026, to maintain the current momentum of concrete support to foster children, youth, and their caregivers, while the State and counties work to implement the Tiered Rate Structure, which will implement on or after July 1, 2027. This two-year extension will ensure no gap in these critical supports and services.

Together, ER Stabilization and Flexible Family Supports are essential to protecting child safety, preserving placements, and sustaining prevention efforts. We respectfully urge approval of \$20 million General Fund for Emergency Response in FY 2026-27 and a two-year extension of Flexible Family Supports funding. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Phillip Peters, Chairman
Kern County Board of Supervisors

cc: Members and Staff of the Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 2
Members and Staff of the Senate Budget Subcommittee No. 3
Honorable Members, Kern Legislative Delegation
County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA)
Kern County Department of Human Services
Shaw Yoder Antwih Schmelzer & Lange