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## Editorial: Helping California's foster kids into adulthood

### Supplemental Security Income could help rescue those with serious disabilities

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Nearly 75,000 young Californians are part of the state's foster care system. They are children who have been removed from their homes because of violence, abuse or neglect.

Given the conditions they encountered at an early age, it shouldn't be surprising that an estimated 15 percent of these children have serious physical disabilities or mental health problems. What is surprising -- more accurately, shocking -- is what happens when these impaired kids reach 18 and leave the foster care system. Many have no way to support themselves. They end up homeless and desperate.

Supplemental Security Income, the federal assistance program that provides a monthly cash payment to the disabled, could help rescue the most vulnerable foster kids, those with serious mental or physical disabilities. But too many foster kids approaching adulthood don't know SSI benefits exist or how to apply for them.

Sensible legislation, Assembly Bill 1331 by Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, would help them. Among other things, it would require county child welfare agencies to screen all foster kids at age 16 for mental or physical disabilities and, where appropriate, assist them in applying for SSI.

The screening required under Evans' bill would help, but alone it won't be enough. Most foster youth are already receiving federal foster care benefits. Federal rules bar them from applying for SSI, an additional federal benefit, until a month before they set out on their own, at 18. Because it takes an average of 440 days to process an SSI application, that means the newly emancipated but seriously disabled foster youth may be on the streets with no support for more than a year before federal aid begins to flow.

There is another problem. Some foster youth come into the system disabled and receiving SSI. In their cases, their SSI benefits go to reimburse counties for their share of foster care costs. AB 1331 initially required counties to place two months of the disabled foster youths' SSI payments into a special fund they would receive when they reached 18. That would have provided the newly emancipated disabled adults a lump sum of approximately \$2,000, money that would help them pay their first and last months' rent, buy groceries and pay utility bills. But Evans struck that provision from the bill after federal Social Security Administration rules changed.

Under the new rules, the Social Security Administration requires counties to send SSI payments held for foster youth who are aging out of the system to their offices first. The federal government, in turn, re-issues the checks to the emancipated foster youth. The problem is there is a lag time of three months to get the money to needy adults.

Legislators should pass the Evans bill, and the governor should sign it. But other action will be needed. Everyone who cares about the plight of disabled former foster children -- legislators, the governor, Congress and the public -- needs to put pressure on the Social Security Administration to change their punitive rules so that SSI payments will begin flowing to the young adults at the time they need SSI most: when they set out on their own.

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