

Moving forward on foster care

Monday, October 15, 2007

Slowly but surely, the state of California is taking steps to ensure that foster children, who are our collective responsibility, are able to live with a modicum of decency and care.

Last week, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed two important bills: AB1331, which requires county welfare agencies to help disabled foster youth apply for the federal Supplemental Security Income program before they are emancipated from the foster care system, and SB39, which publicly opens the case files for foster children who died as a result of abuse and neglect.

Neither of these bills is showy or expensive. What each represents is pragmatism and common sense, two of the most underrated qualities in Sacramento. For that reason, they stand a chance of actually having a positive impact on the lives of California's 86,000 foster children.

AB1331 shouldn't even be necessary - why *wouldn't* county agencies make an attempt to help disabled foster children secure the federal assistance that is available to all disabled people who have little income, not just those who are in foster care? Unfortunately, the need for this law points out how disorganized the foster care system truly is, and how fundamentally it can fail our children. With the passage of AB1331, which was authored by Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, California will become the first state to ensure that disabled foster children have their benefits in place upon emancipation. We hope it won't be the last.

Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, authored SB39, which will provide far more transparency into our foster care system. Before its passage, the only way for a member of the public to learn basic information about a foster child who had died in the system, as a result of abuse and neglect, was to file a lawsuit. Opponents of SB39 - and similar bills that preceded it - claimed that disclosing information about the dead children could be detrimental to the privacy of social workers and foster families. SB39 redacts sensitive information about those parties while reminding the state who it is supposed to be serving - the children placed in its care, not those who are collecting its paychecks.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/10/15/EDFFSOMTK.DTL>

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