



February 7, 2022

The Honorable Buffy Wicks, Chair
Assembly Committee on Housing and Community Development State Capitol Building, Room 4240
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: AB 1615 (TING)—SPONSOR

Dear Chairwoman Wicks,

The California Alliance of Child and Family Services is pleased to sponsor Assembly Bill 1615, authored by Assemblymember Phil Ting, which would reduce homelessness among former foster youth in California by improving supportive housing programs and maximizing federal housing assistance.

The Alliance serves as the official champion and leading voice for over 150 non-profit organizations that advocate for children and families, and for advancing policy and services on their behalf.

Historically, foster youth have experienced alarming rates of homelessness as they transition out of care. While California has taken great strides to address this, 1 in 4 foster youth experience homelessness after exiting care and before turning 23. For youth accessing the Transitional Housing Program-Plus (THP-Plus), the rate is even higher—40% experience homelessness prior to entering the program. The Legislature established THP-Plus in 2001, which provides affordable housing and supportive services to more than 1,300 former foster youth age 18 through 23, for up to 24 months.

AB 1615 would increase the program duration of THP-Plus from 24 months to 36 months and the upper age limit from 23 to 24. Counties have had the option to extend THP-Plus on a limited basis since 2015, when SB 1252 authorized the extension of THP-Plus for an additional year *exclusively for youth enrolled in school*. This optional extension has been regarded as effective: In a September 2021 survey of THP-Plus providers, at least 7 in 10 providers rated the extension for youth in school as very or extremely effective in assisting youth with staying in school, maintaining or improving their mental health, and achieving stable housing at exit. The current proposal would build on this policy, offering it on an equitable basis, regardless of school status or the county in which the youth lives.

In addition to THP-Plus, former foster youth ages 18 through 24 are eligible for one of two federal housing vouchers: the Family Unification Program (FUP) and the Foster Youth to Independence Initiative (FYI). These programs provide former foster youth with Housing Choice Vouchers and supportive services. While the FUP and FYI vouchers offer an opportunity to leverage federal funding, many counties report obstacles in utilizing this resource.

Specifically, some counties do not request vouchers or request few because they know they cannot offer the required supportive services without a dedicated funding source. Further, housing authorities cannot request additional vouchers unless 90% of their vouchers are utilized, meaning youth must be in active leases. This means that even when vouchers are in circulation, if youth are struggling to receive the support they need to secure housing, counties cannot request additional vouchers and youth who are in need remain on the waiting list.



California's Housing Navigators Program (HNP) provides an opportunity to address this issue. HNP was established in 2019 to provide housing navigation and maintenance services to youth ages 18 through 21. Some counties are using their HNP funding to provide housing navigation to youth with FUP and FYI vouchers, however, once a youth turns 22 they are no longer eligible to be served by HNP. Many youth require intensive housing search assistance to utilize the FUP and FYI vouchers and this misaligned age limit not only impacts a county's ability to maximize this resource but puts youth at risk of homelessness as they navigate the voucher process without support.

AB 1615 would align the state's Housing Navigators Program with federal voucher programs by changing the upper age limit from 21 to 24, expanding the priority population from foster youth to also include former foster youth, and changing the program's name to the "Housing Navigation and Maintenance Program."

Together, these provisions will help former foster youth achieve housing stability by improving California's supportive housing programs and ensuring the state can maximize federal housing assistance. We urge you to vote aye on AB 1615.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Stoner-Mertz", is written over a light blue rectangular background.

Chris Stoner-Mertz, CEO

CC: Members, Assembly Committee on Housing and Community Development