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Framework for a New System of Residentially-Based Services in California

Executive Summary February 2007

In November 2004, the California Alliance convened a workgroup of concerned stakeholders to reassess the roles of group homes in the public systems of care for children and youth. The diverse stakeholders' group included: family members, emancipated foster care youth, child and family advocates, county and state public agency officials, representatives of the legislature, and care provider representatives.

After meeting monthly for nearly a year, the workgroup reached consensus on a framework for a new system of residentially-based services (RBS) designed to insure that group home placement is used judiciously, appropriately and effectively in order to obtain specific, affirmative outcomes that cannot be reached using services provided while a child or youth lives in a family setting in the community.

Legislation was introduced by the California Alliance in January 2005 that would have directed the California Health and Human Services Agency Interagency Child Welfare Services Team to craft a detailed plan to make the framework operational, with input from stakeholders, and assistance from outside consultants. The bill also would have required the presentation of this plan for legislative consideration by July 1, 2008. Because the bill included an appropriation of \$500,000 for engagement of the necessary consultants, however, it did not pass out of the necessary fiscal committees.

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS), a key stakeholder represented in the workgroup, indicated its desire to work with the California Alliance to actualize the vision of the RBS framework document. CDSS and the Alliance are working collaboratively to obtain foundation support for engagement of the necessary experts to facilitate RBS reform implementation.

The framework document provides for a system of residentially-based services designed to enhance services and expedite permanent family placement for children receiving group home care by reforming the way group homes are utilized, the range of services they offer and how they are reimbursed for these services. The document provides a vision for transforming the current system of group home care into a more comprehensive new system of child-centered residentially-based services (RBS) that:

- Transitions group homes from a structured often long-term living environment for children who have experienced multiple failed placements in foster family homes to an intensive short-term intervention tasked with returning children to their own homes or to another permanent and stable family setting in as short a time possible.

- Provides for the range of behavioral and/or therapeutic interventions necessary to overcome major obstacles to children living in their own homes or other stable family setting, including two new and critical categories of services which group homes are now not authorized or funded to provide:
 - ✓ Family support services while the children are in the program to prepare families to be able to successfully care for the children when they are discharged.
 - ✓ Post-discharge follow along services to assure that children are able to remain and thrive with their families after they leave the group living arrangement.
- Defines a number of major RBS program features, including:
 - Comprehensive up-front assessment of children by county placing agencies.
 - Matching of individual children's needs with an appropriate RBS program.
 - Involving the children and their families in decision-making.
 - Ensuring quality facilities, programs, and services.
 - Achievement of permanency or stability in a family setting for children at discharge.
 - Identifying and measuring outcomes for children and care providers.
 - Development of a new payment system linked to performance that provides funding sufficient to cover reasonable RBS costs associated with provision of necessary services.

This year the California Alliance is sponsoring AB 1453 (Soto) that would authorize individual counties and private nonprofit agencies to enter into voluntary agreements for cost-neutral projects to test alternative RBS program designs and funding models for children referred from child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health and substance abuse systems. This bill also provides protections necessary to ensure that RBS reforms do not increase State General Fund costs over a three-year period.