

Hillsides 2016-2017 Advocacy Report

Introduction

Maintaining its commitment to the organizational mission statement, Hillsides continues to advocate for children and families at the local, state, and federal levels of government through its government affairs and public policy program. These efforts include collaboration with the membership organizations to which Hillsides belongs, in-person meetings with the elected officials and staff representing the organization's service area, and a robust letter writing campaign on the issues of greatest concern. Our goal is to strengthen the voice of vulnerable children and families in the legislative and policymaking processes, and our advocacy work in the past year has helped to secure important new resources and supports for those children and families while protecting them from misguided reforms and efforts to roll back their protections and rights.

Federal

Hillsides has closely monitored four major federal issues over the past year:

- 1) Health Care Reform: Congress and the President are currently working to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which could have significant consequences for the child welfare system. By expanding Medicaid eligibility and services, strengthening mental health parity laws and access, and providing coverage for transition age foster youth up to age 26, the ACA achieved a number of critical gains for children and families. The replacement legislation being debated in Congress would jeopardize these gains and could have even more serious consequences, including the capping of Medicaid funding. Accordingly, and in collaboration with the membership organizations to which we belong, Hillsides has raised these issues with key policymakers in Washington, DC and has sent letters and made calls to Congressional offices to ensure the needs of children and families are fully considered in this debate.
- 2) Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA): While Hillsides supports the stated intentions of the bill- to prevent unnecessary foster care entries and to limit the use of group care for children in foster care- the actual legislative language has a number of significant flaws. FFPSA would cut off federal funding for all group homes that do not meet a strict definition of "qualified residential treatment program," including some transitional housing programs in California. Due



to several years of sustained collaboration with the bill's sponsors, funding for Hillsides' programs would not be directly jeopardized. However, if enacted the bill would have negative fiscal and policy impacts on Los Angeles County and the State of California and undermine our state's own more comprehensive efforts to better serve children and families through the Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) process. Last year FFPSA died in the Senate on the last day of the session. Nonetheless, it has already been reintroduced this year and another effort to pass it is expected. We will thus continue to work with federal policymakers to amend it to ensure that it addressed our shared goals without negatively impacting California's public and private agencies.

- 3) Mental Health Reform: Advocates across the country have been working for several years to increase the federal government's commitment to children's mental health. A number of important provisions were included in the 21st Century Cures Act, which was signed into law in December 2016. That bill reconfigures the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to give greater priority to mental health issues, bolsters oversight and accountability to ensure compliance with mental health parity law, and creates a new program to address the shortage of mental health professionals. Since passage of this important bill, our focus has shifted to making sure adequate funding is provided for these important reforms, and that they are not undermined by any health reform bill considered by Congress.
- 4) Immigration and Child Welfare: Efforts by the current Administration to enhance immigration enforcement are having serious impacts on the child welfare system, making it harder to recruit and retain resource families and adoptive parents and potentially increasing the number of children placed into foster care due to the deportation of their families. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has also threatened to separate migrant families arriving in the U.S. as a form of deterrence. Hillsides has raised these issues with federal policymakers and signed a letter opposing the separation of families.

State

During the 2016 state legislative session, Hillsides endorsed 10 individual bills and 6 budget requests. Governor Brown ultimately signed 7 of these bills and 3 of our budget requests into law. These included:



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- Ensuring that children placed out-of-county can access mental health services
- Prohibiting employers from requiring employees to disclose juvenile records
- Incentivizing housing developers to set aside units for transition-age foster youth
- Expanding access to higher education vouchers for foster youth
- Extending foster youth priority enrollment at community colleges
- Improving sibling connections for foster children who are adopted
- Requiring the development of detailed mental health plans for foster youth
- Expanding pregnancy prevention programs for foster youth
- Developing housing units for the reunification of families

Meanwhile, Hillsides endorsed 15 individual bills during the 2017 state legislative session, 13 of which are still making their way through the legislative process as of this writing. Hillsides also supported the successful effort to secure new funding for emergency childcare vouchers for foster parents and helped prevent cuts to children’s mental health crisis services proposed by the Governor.

In addition, through its statewide membership association, the California Alliance of Child and Family Services (CACFS), Hillsides has continued to work to ensure a smooth implementation of the state’s Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) process, a restructuring of the practices and financing of the California child welfare system. The full implementation of CCR will take years, but if properly designed it will bolster community-based resources for youth in foster care, help reduce unnecessary group home placements, and provide new supports for the transition from residential care to the community.

County/Local

2016 was a year of transition for Los Angeles County’s child welfare system. Judge Michael Nash took control of the new Office of Child Protection while Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Director Phillip Browning announced his departure in December, as the search continues for his replacement. The November elections also brought two new faces to the County Board of Supervisors.

Local advocates and stakeholders have prioritized child protection, and the County has expanded its use of technology and data - including predictive



analytics - to improve its ability to anticipate and respond to child maltreatment. The County has hired additional social workers and a new training program for law enforcement is being implemented.

Hillsides continues to pursue efforts to improve its relationship with Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD). Our advocacy has focused on holding the district accountable for providing adequate support services for foster children, especially those who are living in Hillsides' residential program. Recent turnover on the school board and administration has created a new opportunity for dialogue, and we continue to explore better ways to ensure that foster youth are supported and adequately served at school.

Measuring Our Work

Over the past year, Hillsides has:

- Held advocacy days at the county, state, and federal levels to engage our representatives.
- Met with the offices of all 5 LA County Board of Supervisors, 6 state legislators, and 6 Members of Congress to relay the organization's advocacy priorities and to educate them about the Hillsides/Bienvenidos merger.
- Sent more than 30 advocacy letters to elected officials on important policy matters.
- The Government Affairs and Public Policy (GAPP) Committee of the Board continues to meet on a quarterly basis to review the organization's advocacy work and help establish the agenda.

Looking ahead

In addition to continuing to undertake the activities listed above, in the coming year Hillsides plans to enhance community awareness of our advocacy work and the key issues facing the child welfare system. The communications and policy teams will be discussing the advocacy landscape on a weekly basis with CEO Joe Costa, to better coordinate efforts and to support the content of the organization's public outreach. We are also planning to host, in partnership with an elected official, a public event centered on an urgent policy issue. Finally we hope to develop a way to recognize the leadership of our allies and policymakers, possibly through annual awards.



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