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Select Committee to Focus on Services for Foster Youth in Relative Care

LOS ANGELES/SACRAMENTO — The California Select Committee on Foster Care will hold a public hearing in Sacramento on February 15, 2006. The Committee, headed by Assemblymember Karen Bass (D-Baldwin Vista), will hear testimony about the challenges that confront abused and neglected California youth in our foster care system who are being cared for by relatives.

California has the highest number of foster children in the nation - 84,500. More than 34% of California's foster children, just under 30,000, are currently placed in the homes of grandparents and other relatives. Research demonstrates that foster children who are able to live with relative caregivers are more likely to stay close to their original home, enabling them to maintain school stability and remain connected to friends, family and their cultural heritage.

Assemblymember Bass underscored the importance of developing new approaches to assist relatives who are providing care for foster youth: "We need to do more to make it possible for relatives who have the responsibility for the well-being of these children to also have the support, funding and legal authority to assure that well-being."

Federal Title IV-E foster care funding regulations often place financial roadblocks in the path of relatives and others who have a close tie with the children in their care and wish to assume legal guardianship over them. This lack of support for legal guardianship is a critical barrier for potential guardians who may be reluctant to usurp family relationships to assume a parental role, but who are nonetheless prepared to provide a permanent, safe home for the children in their care.

"Children living in foster care are crying out for a permanent anchor with whom to bond," observed Miriam Aroni Krinsky, Executive Director of the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles and of Home At Last. "Increased support of legal guardianships by relatives when children cannot return to their birth parents or be adopted would help families create a permanent, loving home for these vulnerable children."

"Subsidizing legal guardianship offers a pathway out of foster care and transfers decision-making rights to grandparents and other caregivers," agreed Mark Testa, Co-Director of *Fostering Results* and Director of the Children & Family Research Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Testa is scheduled to testify before the Committee at their hearing on the 15th. "This is a viable alternative to foster care for children for whom reunification with a parent and adoption are not options."

The Select Committee will focus on key topics in need of attention, including:

- ? Existing federal climate and policy direction toward relative care;
- ? Federal policies and funding stream - what are the barriers;
- ? Recommendations for change on the federal restraints;
- ? Best practices or other suggested programs utilized nationally;
- ? Greatest challenges for relatives;
- ? Research data regarding the outcomes for youth placed with relatives.

The Committee is scheduled to receive testimony from experts in the field of foster care, including Donna Butts, Generations United; Mark Testa, University of Illinois at Urbana-Campaign; and Barbara Needell, University of California Berkeley. In addition, several California families, relative caregivers, and youth will speak about their personal experiences and discuss the areas in which reforms would make a significant difference in their lives.

Prior to the Committee hearing, a California Kinship Rally will take place on the Capitol steps. The rally is planned to celebrate and support relative caregivers and to acknowledge the leadership of California policymakers in establishing programs and services to keep families and children together and safe.

The Select Committee hearing will take place in Room 437 at the State Capitol from 2:00 PM to 5:00 PM on Wednesday, February 15, 2006. It is open to the press and public.

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