

April 19, 2019

Ms. Carla Peterman
Chair, Commission on Catastrophic Wildfire and Cost Recovery
Governor's Office of Planning and Research
1400 Tenth Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: The Commission on Catastrophic Wildfire Cost and Recovery Request for Comments

Dear Chair Peterman,

The organizations below respectfully submit to the Commission on Catastrophic Wildfire and Cost Recovery the following comments on the impacts of the recent wildfires on communities and individuals, in particular those involved with the child welfare system, and recommendations to alleviate these impacts following potential future wildfires.

When children and youth cannot safely remain at home, they often enter foster care and the state becomes their legal parent. These vulnerable young people – who have already experienced significant trauma in their lives – can be placed in family homes with resource parents, treatment facilities, and, as they transition into young adulthood, transitional housing units. The major wildfires that swept through Napa, Sonoma, Los Angeles, and Butte counties over the past two years have had a significant impact on these children and youth and their caregivers:

- Numerous foster homes, transitional housing units, and other placement facilities have been evacuated, damaged, and/or permanently destroyed, displacing foster children and parents and transition age foster youth;
- These children, youth, and families have struggled to have their basic needs met while they have been displaced, often lacking reliable access to housing, food, and clothing;
- Evacuated foster parents and transition age foster youth have also suffered temporary and/or permanent employment disruptions due to the disaster, resulting in lost wages that can be catastrophic for those who might already be economically vulnerable; and
- Children, youth, and families have had to temporarily relocate far from their prior residences, forcing long and costly commutes to get to school, work, visits with relatives and appointments.

While the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) responds to California disasters, their prolonged administrative process can take months to transition seriously impacted families into long-term assistance programs. Each recent disaster has demonstrated that in the crucial first days and weeks, foster youth, families, and community-based organizations (CBOs) too often must fend for themselves, without timely access to critical resources.

On the Move recently published [a report](#) highlighting the impact of the 2017 fires in Napa County on vulnerable populations, the importance of proactive community-level disaster planning, and the

prolonged and frustrating process to transition people who have suffered significant losses into long-term federal assistance.

In addition, a [November 2018 story](#) in *The Chronicle of Social Change* reported on the devastating impact of the Camp Fire on child welfare system-involved children and families in Butte County.

These unfortunate recent experiences demonstrate the need to ensure that dedicated resources are immediately available to meet the needs of these children and families in the wake of a major disaster, and to support county and local community planning processes to develop and coordinate proactive and comprehensive response plans.

Given the inevitability of further large-scale natural disasters in the future, we believe the State of California has a responsibility to take a leadership role in supporting community and system preparedness and ensuring that sufficient resources are immediately available to support disaster-impacted children and families involved with the child welfare system. Therefore, we recommend that the state establish a statewide Child Welfare Emergency Fund designed to improve disaster response by:

1. Financing proactive local/county disaster planning processes and preventative capacity building to improve supports available to foster youth, foster parents, and relative caregivers in the event of a disaster.
2. Immediately authorizing grants and distributing resources to disaster-impacted communities to mitigate and respond to educational, employment, and/or housing disruptions for child-welfare involved children and families.

We appreciate your consideration of our comments and recommendations. Please do not hesitate to contact Susanna Kniffen, Senior Director of Child Welfare Policy at Children Now, if you have any questions (skniffen@childrennow.org or 916-379-5256, ext. 129).

Sincerely,

Children Now

Youth 4 Change (Butte County)

Youth & Family Programs (Butte County)

On the Move/VOICES (Napa/Sonoma counties)

TLC Child & Family Services (Napa/Sonoma counties)

Attachment: "Child Welfare Emergency Fund" Fact Sheet

Cc: Members, Commission on Catastrophic Wildfire Cost and Recovery
Evan Johnson, Executive Officer, Commission on Catastrophic Wildfire Cost and Recovery

Problem

The major wildfires that swept through Napa, Sonoma, Los Angeles, and Butte counties over the past 14 months have had a significant impact on children and families involved with our state's child welfare system:

- ◆ Numerous foster homes, transitional housing units, and other placement facilities have been evacuated, damaged, and/or permanently lost, displacing foster children and parents and transition age foster youth.
- ◆ These children, youth, and families often struggle to have their basic needs met while they are displaced, often lacking reliable access to housing, food, and clothing.
- ◆ Evacuated foster parents and transition age foster youth have also suffered temporary and/or permanent employment disruptions due to the disaster, resulting in lost wages that can be catastrophic for those who might already be economically vulnerable.
- ◆ Children, youth and families have had to temporarily relocate far from their prior residences, forcing long and costly commutes to get to school, work, and appointments.

While the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) responds to California disasters, their prolonged administrative process can take months to transition impacted families into long-term assistance programs. Each recent fire experience has demonstrated that in the crucial first days and weeks, foster youth, families, and community-based organizations (CBOs) too often must fend for themselves, without timely access to critical resources.

These unfortunate recent experiences demonstrate the need to ensure that dedicated resources are immediately available to meet the needs of these children and families in the wake of a major disaster, and to support county and local community planning processes to develop and coordinate proactive and comprehensive response plans.

Solution

Given the inevitability of further large-scale natural disasters in the future, the State of California has a responsibility to take a leadership role in supporting community and system preparedness and ensuring that sufficient resources are immediately available to support disaster-impacted children and families involved with the child welfare system.

The California Legislature should establish a statewide Child Welfare Emergency Fund designed to improve disaster response by:

1. Financing proactive local/county disaster planning processes and preventative capacity building to improve supports available to foster youth, foster parents, and relative caregivers in the event of a disaster.
2. Immediately authorizing grants and distributing resources to disaster-impacted communities to mitigate and respond to educational, employment, and/or housing disruptions for child-welfare involved children and families.

Recent Youth & Family Experiences

These accounts represent actual first-hand stories from the recent California wildfires. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identify of the victims.

Transition Age Youth

Before the Camp Fire struck Butte County, Steven was living in an apartment for transition age foster youth in Paradise, California and working at a grocery store in a nearby community. Though he lacked personal transportation, Steven commuted to his job each day by taking the bus or occasionally getting rides from co-workers that lived nearby. He lost his residence in the fire and was forced to evacuate to Chico, where he is now living. Since he was unable to continue commuting to his previous place of employment, he also unfortunately lost his job and is currently unemployed.

When multiple wildfires broke out in Sonoma County, Jackson was forced to abandon his home and subsequently spent a week living at an evacuation center in Santa Rosa. Roads were closed while the fires burned out of control, cutting Jackson off from his place of employment. As a result, he was unable to work and lost the wages he depends on to pay bills.

Foster Families

When their niece Talia needed to come into foster care, José and Maria stepped up to become her foster parents. They were in the process of adopting her when the Camp Fire broke out. They lost their rental home and all of their belongings in the fire. Without homeowner's insurance or other resources to support them in securing a new place to live, José and Maria had no choice but to move in with Maria's parents. There are currently 11 people temporarily living in the two-bedroom duplex, and due to their lack of housing stability José and Maria have had to put Talia's adoption on hold until they find a more permanent place to live.

John and Theresa are the parents of a teenage son, a two year-old adopted daughter, and an infant that they are fostering. As the fires approached their neighborhood in Santa Rosa, they hastily evacuated with their children and a few belongings to temporarily stay with relatives in the area. Though their home did not burn down, it was severely damaged and unlivable. Over the 4 and ½ months they were displaced from their home, they were forced to secure emergency short-term housing in three different towns. The frequent moves were disruptive to the family and during this time they also struggled to meet basic needs, including food, diapers, and gas.

For the past two decades, Andre and Sharon have lived in Paradise and served as foster parents. When the Camp Fire broke out, they were fostering a set of two siblings. Having lost their home in the fire, they family had to relocate a significant distance away. Now, in order to get both of the girls to their schools, Andre and Sharon have to drive more than 100 miles round trip each day. Other long commutes are also required for other appointments for the girls. The costs associated with the extensive driving required for these purposes has placed a significant financial burden on Andre and Sharon.

For more information, contact Susanna Kniffen at 916.379.5256, ext. 124 or skniffen@childrennow.org.