

### [Out of the foster-care lifeboat](#)

- Miriam Aroni Krinsky, Donna M. Butts  
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The foster-care system is like a lifeboat -- essential in times of emergency, but not intended to be a permanent home. Children enter foster care as a temporary measure when they cannot remain safely with their parents. Too often, however, "what should be a temporary safe haven has become a long-term ordeal for many children," notes Utah Court of Appeals Judge William A. Thorne Jr., a member of the nonpartisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. When children linger in foster care, they are more likely to face emotional, behavioral and academic challenges.

Federal law emphasizes that the ideal way for children to exit foster care is through reunification with the parent, if possible. The next preferable option is adoption. Many children for whom neither is an option languish in foster care for years, drifting from placement to placement. With some assistance, a grandparent, aunt, uncle or other family member may be able to become their legal guardian; however, federal foster-care funding regulations place roadblocks in the path of caregivers. There is no reliable source of federal funding for legal guardianships for children who leave foster care. "At least four times a year, I have to take a day off work to go to court," recounts a grandfather from Sherman Oaks (Los Angeles County) caring for his grandchildren as their foster parent. "A social worker comes out to our house every month. The children are embarrassed, maybe a little ashamed, that they are in foster care, and I am worried that a judge who doesn't know us is making decisions about them."

A study issued last year by Fostering Results, a national project to raise awareness of the need for foster-care reform, points out that, even when children are in stable foster-care placements with relatives, major decisions about their care remain up to the courts and the child-welfare system. Routine activities -- including sleepovers, school pictures and field trips -- can become bureaucratic nightmares requiring court intervention.

The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care recognized that subsidizing guardians could help children leave long-term foster care for safe, loving, permanent homes. Establishing and supporting legal guardianships can create a route out of the foster-care lifeboat and into stable families for youth for whom reunification or adoption are not options. "The court's goal is to find safe and lasting homes for children who have been abused or neglected," Terry Friedman, a former Los Angeles Juvenile Court presiding judge, pointed out. When relatives want to do just that, but need help to cover the financial burden, "they should not have to choose between disrupting their family ties by adoption or remaining in an already overloaded foster-care system," Friedman said.

California has been an early leader in the development of a program to provide subsidies to family members and others who are willing and able to assume legal guardianship for children in the foster-care system. Since its inception, the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payment program has served more than 14,000 California children. Kin-GAP

is a national model for what a subsidized guardianship program should be, and efforts should be made to strengthen the coverage it provides for legal guardians caring for children who leave foster care.

Although the foster-care lifeboat helps protect abused and neglected children, it should be a temporary solution. In certain situations, subsidized guardianship can be a way to bring these vulnerable children -- too long adrift at sea -- home to the safe shores of a loving, permanent family.

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Learn more

The California Select Committee on Foster Care, headed by Assemblymember Karen Bass, D-Baldwin Vista (Los Angeles County), is conducting public hearings to provide an overview of the foster-care system in California. The committee is holding the second in a series of hearings Wednesday; it will target new approaches to assisting relatives who provide care for foster youth.

Where: Room 437, Capitol Building, Sacramento

When: Wednesday, 2-5 p.m.

More information: (916) 319-2047

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Page B - 9

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