Foster care legislation awaits governor's signature

Despite two years of back and forth and several last-minute amendments, a bill to extend benefits for former foster youths passed through the California Assembly and the Senate and now sits on the governor's desk.

The response to Assembly Bill 12 was largely bipartisan in both houses, passing through the Assembly 73-2 and the Senate 26-8. Newly elected senator Sam Blakeslee broke from his Republican caucus and voted in favor of the landmark legislation.

Jim Roberts, founder and CEO of the San Luis Obispo-based nonprofit Family Care Network—which provides a number of services for foster youth, including transitional housing—was ecstatic that the bill cleared both houses and only needed a signature from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"I am absolutely thrilled," Roberts said. "With the extension of these benefits, it's basically adding more opportunities for these young people to obtain those skills, those basics for how to take care of themselves. It creates good stability in their lives."

In January of this year, Schwarzenegger, in an effort to curb state spending, proposed the elimination of a number of social services programs, including transitional housing programs for foster youths. The governor eventually backed off from many of the cuts after substantial public outcry.

"I think this is an opportunity for the governor to do a great service to the foster care system," Roberts said. "He's voiced in the past that this is of genuine interest and concern for him, and given his low approval rating right now, this could be a real positive legacy issue here."

AB 12 is the state's implementation of federal legislation passed in 2008, which offered access to federal funding to serve young adults formerly in the foster system. The federal benefits are available to former foster youths until they turn 21. If signed into law, California's bill promises to continue providing these basic services, while remaining cost-neutral to the state.

Every year, an average of 5,000 18-year-old foster youths age out of the system in California. They typically experience higher rates of unemployment, mental health issues, legal problems, and homelessness, and remain a significant drain on government resources. Conversely, recent studies have shown that every dollar invested in care for former foster youths between the ages of 18 and 21 produces a $2.41 return to public coffers. Δ

—Matt Fountain