**Policy & Practice Implications of “California’s Most Vulnerable Parents”**
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**Recommendation #1: Expand pregnancy prevention services for youth in foster care.** Currently in foster care, there is no standard practice or explicit legal mandate to inform or educate youth in foster care about pregnancy prevention or reproductive health, despite their disproportionate risk of becoming teen parents and the risks that are associated with this for their children. California State Senate Bill 528 (SB 528), authored by Senator Leland Yee (D-San Francisco) recently clarified in state law that county child welfare agencies are authorized to provide age-appropriate information about reproductive health. Additionally, SB 528 added the right to access reproductive health services to the foster care bill of rights. Despite these incremental gains, there remains no specific mandate that youth in foster care have access to information about reproductive health and sexual development.

A number of counties, including Los Angeles County, recognize the importance of improving access to reproductive health information and pregnancy prevention services for youth in foster care and are taking steps to accomplish this goal. In 2012, Alameda County, together with four states, participated in a year-long effort sponsored by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unintended Pregnancy to integrate an evidence-based pregnancy prevention curriculum for adolescents in foster care into their child welfare practice. The evidence-based curriculum, called *Making Proud Choices*, has reached approximately 100 adolescents so far in Alameda County. Representatives of the John Burton Foundation and the National Campaign are developing a proposal to replicate this training initiative in six to eight additional California counties. This effort, and others, are essential to bring critically needed pregnancy prevention and reproductive health information to youth in foster care.

**Recommendation #2: Increase support for pregnant and parenting foster youth.**
As data from the report shows, the birth rate for youth in foster care increases considerably as they age, from 11.5 percent by age 18 to 33 percent by age 21. This has important implications for California, which extended foster care to age 21 effective January 1, 2012 and has subsequently experienced a 150% increase in the number of 18 to 21 year-olds in foster care. Despite this considerable transformation in the demographics of California’s foster care population, state child welfare practice and policy has not changed to address the needs of pregnant and parenting youth. Instead, there are pockets of innovation around the state, including Los Angeles County, which began to conduct specialized conferences for pregnancy and parenting youth in 2008. A recently completed evaluation of the approach found that Los Angeles County pregnant and parenting youth making measurable progress on goals identified in the areas of education, housing, health care, child care and reproductive health.

In addition to the implementation of the specialized conferences for pregnant and parenting dependents, Los Angeles County has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Nurse Family Partnership, an evidence-based program that provides maternal health services to first-time mothers. These services have resulted in improved prenatal health, fewer subsequent pregnancies, and increased maternal employment, among other positive outcomes. By entering into an MOU with this federally-funded program, Los Angeles County is bringing essential maternal and child resources to parenting youth in foster care and preventing the increased likelihood of maltreatment and low-weight births, both of which were more likely among parenting youth in foster care.
Recommendation #3: Provide more affordable, high-quality child care to parenting foster youth.

The report provides clear and compelling evidence that the children of youth in foster care are disproportionately likely to experience maltreatment by age 5. According to the report, the rates of substantiated abuse and neglect among children born to teen mothers with a history of reported or substantiated maltreatment were a full 2 to 3 times higher than the rates of children whose teen mothers had no history of involvement with Child Protective Services. This dramatic effect highlights the need to provide intensive support services to parenting dependents to prevent this unfortunate outcome. One such support is access to affordable, high-quality child care, which has been shown to provide parents with a range of benefits that can prevent maltreatment, including respite to young, almost exclusively single parents, increased knowledge of child development, and the opportunity to pursue employment and education.

Despite the many advantages child care provides to vulnerable parents, it remains inaccessible to parenting youth in foster care. According to data from the California Department of Social Services, in 2012 just four percent of parenting foster youth were receiving or had applied for subsidized child care when they “aged out” of foster care. This is due in large part to the fact that parenting youth in foster care do not have priority status to subsidized child care in California. Instead, they are categorized as “low-income” parents and must vie for the same scarce child care spots as the general population of low-income parents. According to the California Budget Project, there are 193,000 children were on waiting lists for subsidized child care as of March 2011, prior to the loss of an additional 60,000 slots in the FY 2012-13 state budget.

While a number of county child welfare agencies have developed local policies to address this issue, the lack of consistent, statewide access to child care for parenting youth in foster care remains troubling. This concern is heightened by the fact that participation in extended foster care is contingent on the youth engaging in one of five “participation conditions,” all of which are made more difficult, if not impossible, to meet for young parents without childcare. Without access to child care, young parents in foster care are not able to participate in extended foster care and are instead moving on to access CalWORKs, the state’s welfare program which ironically guarantees access to child care.

There are a range of approaches to address the lack of child care for parenting youth in foster care. SB 528 attempted one approach, which was to grant priority status to parenting youth in foster care to access the existing system of subsidized child care, administered by the California Department of Education. Another could be the creation of a parallel child care program, dedicated specifically to parenting youth in foster care, and possibly accessing federal Title IV-E funds. This approach is currently being considered by the California Senate Human Services Committee, Chaired by Senator Leland Yee. An interim measure would be to revise state regulation to ensure parenting youth in foster care are not excluded from participation in extended care due to their inability to participate in one of the five participation conditions.

Recommendation #4: Restore cuts to California’s “mainstream” teen pregnancy prevention programs.

While the entire country has seen a consistent reduction in rates of teen pregnancy over the last 20 years, the reduction in California has been above average. This is due in part to California’s innovative network of community-based programs, which are primarily funded through five public sources: the Adolescent Family Life Program, Community Challenge Grants, the Information and Education Program and the Male Involvement Program. At their peak level of funding in FY 2007-08, California budgeted $46.4 million in funding for these five programs, which directly served 300,000 adolescents in California. Since 2008, however, California has reduced funding for these programs by 72%. In 2012, their combined budgets totaled $12.9 million. In 2012, just 18,288 adolescents were directly served by one of
these five programs, a 94% decline from 2008. This reduction in funding and subsequent reduction in adolescents receiving pregnancy prevention services has serious implications, given the report’s finding about the unique risks associated with teen parenthood, namely a disproportionate rate of involvement with Child Protective Services.

**Recommendation #5: Include access to pregnancy prevention services through differential response.**

In 2012 in California, there were 487,000 allegations of child maltreatment made to the state’s 58 county child welfare agencies, of which 17 percent were substantiated. Many cases that are not substantiated are still referred to community-based services in recognition that there may be a risk of future child maltreatment. This practice of referring non-substantiated cases comes under a practice known in the child welfare field as “differential response.” There are a range of services provided through differential response, which depend on the county’s child welfare practice and the availability of resources.

The evidence included in the report makes a compelling case to include pregnancy prevention services to those offered through differential response. According to the report, there is a strong relationship between being an alleged victim of maltreatment and becoming a teen parent. A full 40 percent of girls who had given birth in their teen years had been reported as alleged victims of abuse or neglect. Through differential response, these alleged victims, who are at disproportionate risk to become teen parents, could be referred to pregnancy prevention services and potentially delay childbearing.

**Recommendation #6: Fully implement Whole Family Foster Homes.**

In 2008, the California State Legislature created a specialized foster care placement for parenting youth, known as Whole Family Foster Homes. In Whole Family Foster Homes, the foster parent serves as a mentor to the young parent, and a Share Responsibility Plan is developed between the foster parents, the adolescent, the Foster Family Agency and the county. The intention of this specialized placement is to provide young parents in foster care with the additional support and assistance to ensure health and well-being of their child as well as to encourage the education and health development of the young parent as they make the transition into adulthood. The newly available evidence about the increased risk of maltreatment among children of youth in foster care underscores the importance of this approach.

Unfortunately, implementation of Whole Family Foster Homes remains limited in most counties for reasons that are largely unknown. Some cite the additional training requirements as an impediment, while others cite concerns about liability that could be addressed in state law. A first step to expanding access to Whole Family Foster Homes is to better understand what factors are preventing their full implementation and utilization.