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**WELFARE AND INSTITUTIONS CODE - WIC**

**DIVISION 9. PUBLIC SOCIAL SERVICES [10000 - 18999.98]** ( *Division 9 added by Stats. 1965, Ch. 1784.* )

**PART 4. SERVICES FOR THE CARE OF CHILDREN [16000 - 16589]** ( *Heading of Part 4 amended by Stats. 1978, Ch. 429.* )

**CHAPTER 5.6. Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support Program [16546 - 16549]** ( *Chapter 5.6 added by Stats. 2022, Ch. 573, Sec. 24.* )

**16546.** The Legislature finds and declares all of the following:

- (a) Identifying and engaging family members are critical components of providing effective child welfare services to children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect.
- (b) For Indian children subject to an Indian child custody proceeding, as defined in subdivision (d) of Section 224.1 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, dedicated and specialized efforts for family finding, engagement, and support are critical to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families, to comply with the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (25 U.S.C. Sec. 1901 et seq.) and other applicable federal and state law, and to protect the best interests of the child.
- (c) Often, family members may become caregivers for children or may be able to provide other help and support to children and families on an ongoing basis.
- (d) Supporting dedicated and specialized efforts for family finding, engagement, and support has been shown to increase the success of identifying relative caregivers and engaging relatives and other supportive adults to support children and families during and after reunification, and can support permanency in cases where reunification cannot occur. These dedicated and specialized efforts have proven to increase placements with and connections to relatives up front when children first enter out-of-home care, and to increase legal and relational permanency for children who have been in out-of-home care for a longer time.

(*Added by Stats. 2022, Ch. 573, Sec. 24. (AB 207) Effective September 27, 2022.*)

**16546.5.** (a) Subject to an appropriation of state funds, there is hereby established the Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support Program. This program shall be administered by the State Department of Social Services.

(b) In administering the program, the department shall do all of the following:

(1) Develop, in consultation with the County Welfare Directors Association of California and the Chief Probation Officers of California, an allocation methodology for counties that elect to receive funds under this section.

(2) On or before March 1, 2023, make funds available to participating counties according to the allocation methodology developed pursuant to paragraph (1).

(c) (1) A county may elect to participate in the program by submitting a written notice to the department in accordance with instructions issued by the department.

(2) A county that elects to participate in the program shall provide a match of local funds, which may include in-kind contributions of services or other resources from the county or community-based organizations, equal to one-half of all state funds provided to the county under the program.

(d) (1) The department shall consult with Indian tribes to develop an allocation methodology and procedures for program participation for Indian tribes, consortia of tribes, or tribal organizations, as defined in Section 137.10 of Title 42 of the Code of Federal Regulations.

(2) An Indian tribe, consortia of tribes, or tribal organization, as defined in Section 137.10 of Title 42 of the Code of Federal Regulations, that enters into an agreement with the department pursuant to Section 10553.1 of this code or Section 1919 of Title 25 of the United States Code shall, in accordance with the agreement, be eligible to receive allocations of funds under this section.

(e) Funds allocated under this section and the local match described in paragraph (2) of subdivision (c) shall be used for specialized permanency work, including culturally responsive, family-centered, and trauma-informed family finding and engagement services. Services shall focus on establishing and maintaining permanent connections for foster children. Funded activities shall include any or all of the following:

(1) Training of staff on family finding and engagement practices and models.

(2) Staffing and tools to identify, locate, and engage persons related to the child by blood or marriage, identification and engagement of other family-like relationships, and in the case of an Indian child, to make active efforts to engage with the tribe to determine the child's extended family members, as defined in Section 224.1. This may include use of internet and social media tools, genograms, database searches, and other technological tools to support family finding.

(3) Outreach and engagement of the child and family team members and all other current and prior service providers, case managers, and other connections to the foster child, to identify and engage possible family and family-like connections.

(4) Plan development and case management for the child, family, and family-like connections to identify and address any barriers to establishing or reestablishing positive, loving, and supportive relationships. Counties and participating tribes shall engage children continuously in plan development, case planning, and services of importance to the child.

(5) Implementation of model programs, strategies, or promising practices identified by the department in consultation with tribes, the County Welfare Directors Association of California, the Chief Probation Officers of California, and child and youth advocacy organizations. The model programs, strategies, or promising practices include, but are not limited to, model programs, strategies, or promising practices that focus on up front family finding and engagement and that focus on family finding and engagement techniques to find permanent families and relationships for foster children who have been in out-of-home foster care for 24 months or longer, who are not living with a relative, for whom reunification is no longer in the case plan, and who have not been placed with a family who is in the process of adopting them or assuming guardianship over them.

(f) A participating county may elect to contract with a nonprofit community-based organization to provide the services described in this section.

(g) A participating county or contracted nonprofit community-based organization shall employ family-finding workers who have experience or training in family-finding strategies or practice, which may include lived experience.

(h) (1) Family-finding workers shall be assigned to family-finding responsibilities full time but may be employed by either the participating county or a nonprofit community-based organization with which the participating county has contracted for this purpose.

(2) Notwithstanding paragraph (1), a participating county or tribe without a family-finding worker assigned full time to family-finding responsibilities due to an insufficient caseload, as determined by the department, may submit a written request to the department for authorization to use funding to pay for the portion of a family-finding worker's time dedicated to family-finding activities. The request shall be submitted in a manner to be prescribed by the department and shall include, at a minimum, the following information:

(A) Caseload information to support the assertion of an insufficient caseload for the worker to be assigned full time to family-finding responsibilities.

(B) The proportion of the family-finding worker's time assigned to family-finding responsibilities.

(i) A county shall provide information to the department on which of the activities specified in paragraphs (1) to (5), inclusive, of subdivision (e) the participating county has performed.

*(Amended by Stats. 2024, Ch. 46, Sec. 50. (AB 161) Effective July 2, 2024.)*

**16547.** (a) (1) The department shall establish procedures for program data collection and reporting.

(2) The department shall consult with Indian tribes that enter into agreements with the department pursuant to Section 10553.1 of this code or Section 1919 of Title 25 of the United States Code to develop procedures for program data collection and reporting for Indian tribes, consortia of tribes, or tribal organizations.

(3) Participating counties shall collect and report program data in accordance with written instructions issued by the department, which shall be determined in consultation with the County Welfare Directors Association of California, the Chief Probation Officers of California, child and youth advocacy organizations, and the representatives of county child welfare workers. These data shall include, but not be limited to, information regarding training completion, strategies and models utilized by participating counties, and services provided. This information shall include activities, as described in subdivision (e) of Section 16546.5, for which participating counties provide information to the department for allocations, as described in subdivision (i) of Section 16546.5.

(b) (1) The department shall establish procedures for tracking and reporting program outcomes measures, in consultation with the County Welfare Directors Association of California, the Chief Probation Officers of California, child and youth advocacy organizations, and the representatives of county child welfare workers.

(2) The department shall consult with Indian tribes that enter into agreements with the department pursuant to Section 10553.1 of this code or Section 1919 of Title 25 of the United States Code to develop procedures for tracking and reporting program outcome measures for Indian tribes, consortia of tribes, or tribal organizations.

(3) The department shall work with counties and tribes to identify the most efficient manner to track outcomes utilizing the statewide child welfare information system. Any additional program outcomes shall be reported in accordance with written instructions issued by the department.

(4) Outcomes to be measured shall be developed in consultation with the County Welfare Directors Association of California, the Chief Probation Officers of California, child and youth advocacy organizations, and the representatives of county child welfare workers, and shall include, but not be limited to, all of the following:

(A) Changes in the percentage of children initially or subsequently placed with a relative or nonrelative extended family member.

(B) Changes in the percentage of children placed in a family setting.

(C) Changes in placement stability experienced by children in out-of-home care.

(D) Changes in length of time to permanency for children in out-of-home care through reunification, guardianship, or adoption.

(E) Changes in racial disproportionality of children who experience placements in congregate care.

(F) Changes in racial disproportionality of children who experience placement disruption.

(G) Changes in the percentage of children placed with relatives or nonrelative extended family members after having been in out-of-home foster care for 24 months or longer in a nonrelative placement and subsequently been subject to family finding and engagement.

*(Added by Stats. 2022, Ch. 573, Sec. 24. (AB 207) Effective September 27, 2022.)*

**16547.5.** Funds allocated under this chapter may be used to supplement, but shall not supplant, funds for existing family finding and engagement programs. Participating counties shall maintain records demonstrating that project funds have not supplanted funding for existing programs. These records shall be made available to the department upon request. The department shall consult with Indian tribes that enter into agreements with the department pursuant to Section 10553.1 of this code or Section 1919 of Title 25 of the United States Code regarding the maintenance and availability of records for project funds for Indian tribes, consortia of tribes, or tribal organizations.

*(Added by Stats. 2022, Ch. 573, Sec. 24. (AB 207) Effective September 27, 2022.)*

**16548.** (a) Subject to an appropriation of state funds, the department shall establish, or contract for the establishment of, the Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support. The Department shall consider input from stakeholders regarding the desired priorities of the center.

(b) The center shall provide, or contract for the provision of, multitiered, culturally appropriate training and technical assistance to county child welfare and probation departments, participating tribes, and foster care providers to enhance their practices, policies, and efforts for family finding, support, and engagement. This may include, but is not limited to, any of the following:

(1) Conducting evidence-based, organization-specific assessments of implementation activities.

(2) Strengthening trauma-informed practices and programs related to finding, engaging, and supporting relatives, and in the case of an Indian child, extended family members, as defined in Section 224.1, and the children with whom they interact as caregivers or as providers of other support toward reunification, permanency, or other ongoing involvement in a child's life.

(3) Developing and training workforce regarding how to support family finding and engagement, including, in the case of an Indian child, ensuring due diligence to inquire pursuant to Section 224.2, and improving staff skills and practices regarding reunification, permanency, or other ongoing involvement of relatives or extended family members in a child's life.

(4) Providing guidance and research on evidence-based family finding and engagement models and practices.

(5) Providing peer-to-peer learning opportunities for counties, participating tribes, and providers to share and leverage best practices for family finding and engagement program and practice development and sustainability.

(6) Other relevant training and technical assistance for counties, participating tribes, and providers regarding reunification, permanency, or other ongoing involvement of family members in a child's life, including, in the case of an Indian child, the child's tribe and tribal community.

(c) Once the center has been established and a training model has been developed, the center shall train family finding and engagement program staff from counties, participating tribes, and contracted nonprofit community-based organizations to ensure model fidelity and best practices.

*(Added by Stats. 2022, Ch. 573, Sec. 24. (AB 207) Effective September 27, 2022.)*

**16548.5.** Notwithstanding Chapter 3.5 (commencing with Section 11340) of Part 1 of Division 3 of Title 2 of the Government Code, the department may implement, interpret, or make specific this chapter, in whole or in part, by means of all-county letters or similar written instructions, without taking any further regulatory action. These all-county letters or similar written instructions shall have the same force and effect as regulations.

*(Added by Stats. 2022, Ch. 573, Sec. 24. (AB 207) Effective September 27, 2022.)*

**16549.** Contracts entered into or amended pursuant to this chapter are exempt from Chapter 6 (commencing with Section 14825) of Part 5.5 of Division 3 of Title 2 of the Government Code, Section 19130 of the Government Code, Part 2 (commencing with Section 10100) of Division 2 of the Public Contract Code, and the State Administrative Manual, and are exempt from the review or approval of any division of the Department of General Services.

*(Added by Stats. 2022, Ch. 573, Sec. 24. (AB 207) Effective September 27, 2022.)*