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AB-997 Child health and safety: “Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids” license plate program. (2025-2026)

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CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE— 2025–2026 REGULAR SESSION

ASSEMBLY BILL

NO. 997

Introduced by Assembly Member Stefani

February 20, 2025

An act to amend, repeal, and add Section 5072 of the Vehicle Code, and to amend, repeal, and add Section 18285 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, relating to license plate revenue.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 997, as introduced, Stefani. Child health and safety: “Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids” license plate program.

Existing law requires the Department of Motor Vehicles to issue “Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help our Kids” special license plates and imposes additional fees, as specified, for their issuance, renewal, replacement, and transfer. Existing law requires that those additional fees be deposited in the Child Health and Safety Fund, less specified amounts. Existing law requires that 50% of the funds derived from “Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids” license plates be available, upon appropriation, to the State Department of Social Services for administering various provisions related to childcare licensing, as specified. Existing law requires that, upon appropriation by the Legislature, the balance be available, as described, for programs that address other categories of potential childhood injury, as specified. Existing law requires counties to create local childcare resource and referral programs to identify childcare resources and establish a referral process for parents, among other things. Existing law also creates the California Children and Families Commission, to promote, support, and improve early childhood development. Existing law provides for funding to county commissions that develop, adopt, promote, and implement local early childhood development programs consistent with specified goals and objectives.

This bill would, commencing July 1, 2027, increase the fees for the initial issuance and renewal of the “Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids” license plates.

The bill would, commencing July 1, 2027, allocate, upon an appropriation by the Legislature, 50% of the fees collected before July 1, 2027, to state and local childcare provider licensure, oversight, recruitment, training, and development, and the remainder to childcare safety and health, as specified. Of the fees collected on or after July 1, 2027, the bill would allocate 50% for programs that address specified child health and safety concerns and the remainder of the funding would be allocated for specified child abuse prevention purposes.

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

SECTION 1. Section 5072 of the Vehicle Code is amended to read:

5072. (a) Any person described in Section 5101 may also apply for a set of "Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids" license plates, and the department shall issue those special license plates in lieu of the regular license plates. The "Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids" plates shall be distinct from other existing license plates by the inclusion of a well within the portion of the license plate that has the alpha-numeric sequence. The well may be placed in any position within that portion of the license plate. A heart shape, a five-pointed star, a hand shape, a plus-sign shape, shall be imprinted within the well itself. However, for purposes of processing the alpha-numeric sequence, the symbol within the well shall be read as a blank within the alpha-numeric sequence. The Department of Motor Vehicles shall cooperate with representatives of the California Highway Patrol and the Prison Industries Authority to design the final shape and dimension of the symbols for these license plates.

(b) An applicant for a license plate described in subdivision (a) may choose to either accept a license plate character sequence assigned by the department that includes one of the four symbols or request a specialized license plate character sequence determined by the applicant that includes one of the four symbols, in accordance with instructions ~~which~~ *that* shall be provided by the department.

(c) In addition to the regular fees for an original registration, a renewal of registration, or a transfer of registration, the following "Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids" license plate fees shall be paid:

(1) Notwithstanding Section 5106, for those specialized license plates whose character sequence is determined by the license owner or applicant:

(A) Fifty dollars (\$50) for the initial issuance of the plates. These plates shall be permanent and shall not be required to be replaced.

(B) Forty dollars (\$40) for each renewal of registration which includes the continued display of the plates.

(C) Fifteen dollars (\$15) for transfer of the plates to another vehicle.

(D) Thirty-five dollars (\$35) for replacement plates, if the plates become damaged or unserviceable.

(2) For those specialized license plates whose character sequence is assigned by the department:

(A) Twenty dollars (\$20) for the initial issuance of the plates. These plates shall be permanent and shall not be required to be replaced.

(B) The legally allowed fee for renewal plus fifteen dollars (\$15) for each renewal of registration, which includes the continued display of the plates.

(C) Fifteen dollars (\$15) for transfer of the plates to another vehicle.

(D) Twenty dollars (\$20) for replacement plates, if the plates become damaged or unserviceable.

(d) When payment of renewal fees is not required as specified in Section 4000, or when the person determines to retain the "Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids" license plates upon sale, trade, or other release of the vehicle upon which the plates have been displayed, the person shall notify the department and the person may retain the plates.

(e) The revenue derived from the additional special fees provided in this section, less costs incurred by the department, the Department of the California Highway Patrol, and local law enforcement for developing and administering this license plate program pursuant to this section, shall be deposited in the Child Health and Safety Fund, created pursuant to Chapter 4.6 (commencing with Section 18285) of Part 6 of Division 9 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, and, when appropriated by the Legislature shall be available for the purposes specified in that chapter.

(f) It is the intent of the Legislature that the additional special fees specified in subdivision (e) are not used to replace existing appropriation levels in the 1991–92 Budget Act.

(g) This section shall become inoperative on July 1, 2027, and, as of January 1, 2028, is repealed.

SEC. 2. Section 5072 is added to the Vehicle Code, to read:

5072. (a) Any person described in Section 5101 may also apply for a set of "Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids" license plates, and the department shall issue those special license plates in lieu of the regular license plates. The "Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids" plates shall be distinct from other existing license plates by the inclusion of a well within the portion of the license plate that has the alpha-numeric sequence. The well may be placed in any position within that portion of the license plate. A heart shape, a five-pointed star, a hand shape, a plus-sign shape, shall be imprinted within the well itself. However, for purposes of processing the alpha-numeric sequence, the symbol within the well shall be read as a blank within the alpha-numeric sequence. The Department of Motor Vehicles shall cooperate with representatives of the California Highway Patrol and the Prison Industries Authority to design the final shape and dimension of the symbols for these license plates.

(b) An applicant for a license plate described in subdivision (a) may choose to either accept a license plate character sequence assigned by the department that includes one of the four symbols or request a specialized license plate character sequence determined by the applicant that includes one of the four symbols, in accordance with instructions that shall be provided by the department.

(c) In addition to the regular fees for an original registration, a renewal of registration, or a transfer of registration, the following "Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids" license plate fees shall be paid:

(1) Notwithstanding Section 5106, for those specialized license plates whose character sequence is determined by the license owner or applicant:

(A) Ninety dollars (\$90) for the initial issuance of the plates. These plates shall be permanent and shall not be required to be replaced.

(B) Eighty dollars (\$80) for each renewal of registration that includes the continued display of the plates.

(C) Fifteen dollars (\$15) for transfer of the plates to another vehicle.

(D) Thirty-five dollars (\$35) for replacement plates, if the plates become damaged or unserviceable.

(2) For those specialized license plates whose character sequence is assigned by the department:

(A) Forty dollars (\$40) for the initial issuance of the plates. These plates shall be permanent and shall not be required to be replaced.

(B) The legally allowed fee for renewal plus thirty dollars (\$30) for each renewal of registration, which includes the continued display of the plates.

(C) Fifteen dollars (\$15) for transfer of the plates to another vehicle.

(D) Twenty dollars (\$20) for replacement plates, if the plates become damaged or unserviceable.

(d) When payment of renewal fees is not required as specified in Section 4000, or when the person determines to retain the "Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids" license plates upon sale, trade, or other release of the vehicle upon which the plates have been displayed, the person shall notify the department and the person may retain the plates.

(e) The revenue derived from the additional special fees provided in this section, less costs incurred by the department, the Department of the California Highway Patrol, and local law enforcement for developing and administering this license plate program pursuant to this section, shall be deposited in the Child Health and Safety Fund, created pursuant to Chapter 4.6 (commencing with Section 18285) of Part 6 of Division 9 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, and, when appropriated by the Legislature shall be available for the purposes specified in that chapter.

(f) It is the intent of the Legislature that the additional special fees specified in subdivision (e) are not used to replace existing appropriation levels in the 1991–92 Budget Act.

(g) This section shall become operative on July 1, 2027.

SEC. 3. Section 18285 of the Welfare and Institutions Code is amended to read:

18285. (a) There is hereby created in the State Treasury the Child Health and Safety Fund for the purposes specified in this section.

(b) Moneys for this fund shall be derived from the license plate program provided for pursuant to Section 5072 of the Vehicle Code and from civil penalties on child daycare facility providers.

(c) Moneys in the fund shall be expended, upon appropriation by the Legislature, for the purposes specified in subdivisions (d), (e), and (f).

(d) Fifty percent of moneys derived from the license plate program pursuant to Section 5072 of the Vehicle Code shall be available, upon appropriation, to the State Department of Social Services for the purpose of administering provisions of Sections 1596.816, 1596.87, 1596.872b, 1596.893b 1596.895, 1596.95, 1597.091, 1597.54, 1597.541, 1597.542, 1597.55b and 1597.62 of the Health and Safety Code. Upon appropriation by the Legislature, an additional five hundred one thousand dollars (\$501,000), in excess of the 50 percent derived from the license plate program, also shall be made available for these purposes. The State Department of Social Services shall allocate these special funds according to the following priorities:

- (1) Site visits performed pursuant to Sections 1597.091 and 1597.55b of the Health and Safety Code.
- (2) The monitoring responsibility of the childcare advocate program.
- (3) Training for investigative and licensing field staff.
- (4) Other aspects of the childcare advocate program performed pursuant to Section 1596.872b of the Health and Safety Code.
- (5) The salary of the chief of the childcare licensing branch.

In order to implement the list of priorities set forth in this subdivision, and to complete implementation of subdivision (a) of Section 1596.816 of the Health and Safety Code, the State Department of Social Services may, as necessary, fund appropriate administrative support costs.

(e) The balance of funds remaining after the appropriations specified in subdivision (d) derived from the license plate program pursuant to Section 5072 of the Vehicle Code shall be available, upon appropriation, for programs that address any of the following child health and safety concerns and that are either to be carried out within a two-year period or whose implementation is dependent upon one-time initial funding:

- (1) Child abuse prevention, except that not more than 25 percent of the moneys in this fund shall be used for this purpose. Ninety percent of the 25 percent shall be deposited in the county children's trust fund, established pursuant to Section 18966 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, for the support of child abuse prevention services in the community, and 10 percent of the 25 percent shall be deposited in the State Children's Trust Fund, established pursuant to Section 18969, for public education, training, and technical assistance.
- (2) Vehicular safety, including restraint, warnings, and education programs.
- (3) Drowning prevention.
- (4) Playground safety standards.
- (5) Pedestrian Safety.
- (6) Bicycle safety.
- (7) Gun safety.
- (8) Fire safety.
- (9) Poison control and safety.
- (10) In-home safety.
- (11) Childhood poisoning, including from prescription medications, lead, and other toxic substances.
- (12) Sleep suffocation and sudden infant death syndrome.
- (13) Children left in parked cars and children run over by cars moving forward or backward.
- (14) Sports-related concussions, heat stroke, and spinal injury safety.

(f) Moneys derived from civil penalties imposed on daycare facility providers shall be made available, upon appropriation, to the State Department of Social Services exclusively for the technical assistance, orientation, training, and education of child daycare facility providers.

(g) This section shall become inoperative on July 1, 2027, and, as of January 1, 2028, is repealed.

SEC. 4. Section 18285 is added to the Welfare and Institutions Code, to read:

18285. (a) There is hereby created in the State Treasury the Child Health and Safety Fund for the purposes specified in this section.

(b) Moneys for this fund shall be derived from the license plate program provided for pursuant to Section 5072 of the Vehicle Code and from civil penalties on child daycare facility providers.

(c) Moneys allocated to the Child Health and Safety Fund from the specialty vehicle license plate program pursuant to Section 5072 of the Vehicle Code shall be expended, upon appropriation by the Legislature, for the purposes specified in subdivisions (d) and (e).

(d) (1) Fifty percent of the moneys derived from the license plate program pursuant to Section 5072 of the Vehicle Code before July 1, 2027, shall be available, upon appropriation, to state and local childcare provider licensure, oversight, recruitment, training, and development.

(2) The moneys described in paragraph (1) shall be allocated to the State Department of Social Services for the purpose of administering Sections 1596.816, 1596.87, 1596.872b, 1596.893b, 1596.895, 1596.95, 1597.091, 1597.54, 1597.541, 1597.542, 1597.55b, and 1597.62 of the Health and Safety Code. The allocation shall be not less than the allocation appropriated by the Legislature during the 2024–25 fiscal year to support the administration of those provisions. Upon appropriation by the Legislature, an additional five hundred one thousand dollars (\$501,000), in excess of the 50 percent derived from the license plate program, shall be made available for these purposes. The State Department of Social Services shall allocate these special funds according to the following priorities:

(A) Site visits performed pursuant to Sections 1597.091 and 1597.55b of the Health and Safety Code.

(B) The monitoring responsibility of the childcare advocate program.

(C) Training for investigative and licensing field staff.

(D) Other aspects of the childcare advocate program performed pursuant to Section 1596.872b of the Health and Safety Code.

(E) The salary of the chief of the childcare licensing branch. In order to implement the list of priorities set forth in this paragraph, and to complete implementation of subdivision (a) of Section 1596.816 of the Health and Safety Code, the State Department of Social Services may, as necessary, fund appropriate administrative support costs.

(3) The remainder of the funds derived from the license plate program prior to July 1, 2027, following allocation pursuant to paragraph (2), shall be allocated to childcare safety and health as follows:

(A) Ninety percent of the funds or an adjusted amount based on the initial distribution in paragraph (2) shall be allocated to the 58 First 5 county commissions on a per-capita basis, as follows:

(i) Fifty percent of the funds described in subparagraph (A) shall be distributed to the 58 First 5 County Commissions in counties with a population greater than 500,000, who shall receive equal amounts of the available Kids Plates funding.

(ii) Fifty percent of the funds described in subparagraph (A) shall be distributed to the 58 First 5 County Commissions in counties with a population of 500,000 or fewer, who shall receive equal amounts of the available Kids Plates funding.

(B) Funds allocated pursuant to subparagraph (A) shall be used for one or both of the following:

(i) Recruiting new childcare providers.

(ii) Supporting education and training for new childcare providers or continuing education for existing childcare providers, including licensed and exempt providers.

(C) Ten percent of the funds described in this paragraph shall be allocated to the state agency having oversight of new and continuing childcare provider health and safety education and training program curriculum and shall be used for the following purposes:

(i) Review and approval of childcare provider health and safety education and training as established in Chapter 1.1 (commencing with Section 100000.1) of Division 9 of Title 22 of the California Code of Regulations.

(ii) Onsite reviews of approved education and training programs to ensure approved curriculum is adhered to and to observe the quality of the education and training program delivery.

(iii) Coordination with relevant bodies involved in improving access, quality, and affordability of childcare, including, but not limited to, childcare provider recruitment and planning agencies, academic institutions, and childcare and child development councils.

(e) Fifty percent of the moneys derived from the license plate program pursuant to Section 5072 of the Vehicle Code on or after July 1, 2027, shall be available, upon appropriation, for programs that address any of the following child health and safety concerns and that are either to be carried out within a two-year period or whose implementation is dependent upon one-time initial funding:

(1) The moneys identified in subdivision (e) shall be distributed in the following three ways to support childhood injury prevention:

(A) 75 percent of the funds shall be distributed to each of the state's county First 5 county commissions created pursuant to Section 130140.1 of the Health and Safety Code that elect to receive the funds based on the following allocation formula. The choice to elect to receive the funds is based on an annual survey of all 58 county commissions conducted by the nonprofit staffing the Safer California Project and reported to the appropriate state agency charged with the actual allocation of the funds to the First 5 county commissions.

(i) County commissions in counties with populations over 100,000 shall receive equal shares of 80 percent of the available funds for distribution to county commissions opting into receiving these funds based on the survey completed pursuant to this subparagraph.

(ii) County commissions in counties with populations equal to, or under 100,000 shall receive equal shares of 20 percent of the available funds for distribution to county commissions opting into receiving these funds based on the survey completed pursuant to this subparagraph.

(iii) The county commissions receiving these funds shall only utilize the funds for programs that address the categories described in clause (v) that are either to be carried out within a two-year period or whose implementation is dependent upon one-time initial funding.

(iv) Each county commission electing to receive this funding shall use the funds for any of the following:

(I) To support local programs that further unintentional injury prevention in one or any of the unintentional injury categories described in clause (v).

(II) To supplement and not supplant existing funding supporting programs furthering child health and safety and aligned with childhood unintentional injury prevention.

(III) To promote and practice those evidence-based best prevention practices addressing childhood unintentional injury provided or recommended by the California Unintentional Injury Prevention Strategic Plan.

(IV) At the county commission's discretion, to participate with the California Unintentional Injury Prevention Strategic Plan Project pursuant to the project's responsibilities in subparagraph (C).

(V) Where appropriate, to collaborate with regional or local childhood unintentional injury prevention coalitions or programs, including childhood unintentional injury prevention coalitions or programs in tribal lands.

(VI) The commissions may use the funds described in this paragraph to participate at the annual California Children and Families Commission conference but only if that conference has programs or tracks of activities focused on childhood unintentional injury prevention and participate in the biennial Safer California Unintentional Injury Prevention conference.

(v) The funds allocated pursuant to this subparagraph shall only be used to address the following childhood unintentional injury issues:

(I) Vehicular safety, including restraint, warnings, and education programs.

(II) Drowning prevention.

(III) Playground safety standards.

(IV) Pedestrian safety.

(V) Bicycle safety.

(VI) Gun safety.

(VII) Home fire and burn safety and family disaster planning.

(VIII) Poison control safety.

(IX) In-home safety.

(X) Childhood poisoning, including from prescription medications, lead, and other toxic substances.

(XI) Sleep suffocation and sudden infant death syndrome.

(XII) Children left in parked cars and children run over by cars moving forward or backward.

(XIII) Sports-related concussions, heat stroke, cardiac arrest, and spinal injury safety.

(XIV) Unintentional injuries associated with mental health.

(B) Seventeen percent of the funds identified in paragraph (1) shall be distributed to the State Department of Public Health's branch responsible for childhood injury prevention for three purposes:

(i) Provide technical assistance and distribution of evidence-based prevention practices information to childhood injury prevention programs engaged in childhood injury prevention issue categories described in clause (v) of subparagraph (A).

(ii) Provide oversight and accountability of programs conducted pursuant to subparagraph (C) as reported annually to the State Department of Public Health by the organization providing administration and staffing for the California Unintentional Injury Prevention Strategic Plan Project pursuant to subparagraph (C).

(iii) Provide planning, financial, and attendance support to the biennial Safer California Unintentional Injury Prevention conference.

(C) Eight percent of the funds identified in paragraph (1) shall be allocated to the nonprofit organization providing administration and staffing to the California Unintentional Injury Prevention Strategic Plan Project, known as the Safer California Project, with responsibility to:

(i) Support statewide networking of local childhood unintentional injury prevention coalitions and programs.

(ii) Support evidence-based, best practice technical assistance and training programs for childhood unintentional injury prevention, including sharing successful local models of unintentional injury prevention, for local prevention coalitions, programs, and county commissions as described in clause (v) of subparagraph (A).

(iii) Support the updating of childhood unintentional injury prevention strategic planning identification of the top 10 action priorities necessary to support the state ending unintentional injury as the leading cause of death and hospitalizations of California's children and youth through 19 years of age.

(iv) Planning activities for the biennial Safer California Unintentional Injury Prevention conference.

(v) Support public policy to prevent childhood unintentional injury.

(vi) Conduct an annual survey of the county commissions created through Section 130140.1 of the Health and Safety Code to determine which of the county commissions elect to receive this funding, and to transmit that survey result to the state for distribution of the funding to the county commissions.

(vii) Provide the State Department of Public Health childhood injury prevention branch with an annual report on actions carried out pursuant to this subparagraph.

(2) The remaining 50 percent of the funds derived from the license plate program on and after July 1, 2027, shall be used for child abuse prevention as follows:

(A) Ninety percent of the moneys described in this paragraph shall be deposited in the county children's trust fund, established pursuant to Section 18966 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, for the support of child abuse prevention services in the community.

(B) Ten percent of the moneys described in this paragraph shall be deposited in the State Children's Trust Fund, established pursuant to Section 18969, for public education, training, and technical assistance.

(f) Moneys derived from civil penalties imposed on daycare facility providers shall be made available, upon appropriation, to the State Department of Social Services exclusively for the technical assistance, orientation, training, and education of child daycare facility providers.

(g) This section shall become operative on July 1, 2027.