

THE DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE

June 9, 2014

Honorable Ed Hernandez, Chair
Senate Health Committee
State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814
Fax: 916-4924

Support for AB1790 – Adoption-Competent Clinicians

Dear Senator Hernandez:

AB 1790 addresses a critical need in the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in our state.

I am Research Director of the Donaldson Adoption Institute in New York City and Professor Emeritus of Clinical Psychology at Rutgers University. I am also in private clinical psychology in Oakland, CA.

Over 100,000 children in CA have exited foster care into adoptive and guardianship families during the past 10 years. Before that, most had already endured one or more early life adversities - from prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol to postnatal difficulties such as child maltreatment and multiple foster placements. These children are at significant risk for a wide range of psychological and educational problems and often pose tremendous parenting challenges to the families who have made a loving commitment to raising them. Nationally-based data indicate that 57% of adolescents achieving permanence from foster care receive mental health services.

In a report I authored for the Donaldson Adoption Institute last year, it was noted that while most mental health professionals currently serving these children have good clinical training, they have not received adequate specialized training related to working with adoptive families. This means they often don't know what they don't know, leading in too many cases to ineffective treatment for the family. In that report several national surveys were cited confirming that few clinical training programs offer adoption-specific coursework and that many clinicians do not feel adequately prepared to treat the complex trauma and attachment issues facing their clients who were adopted. Other surveys of adoptive parents noted they are frequently dissatisfied with the quality of services their children and families receive from mental health providers.

We strongly recommend intensive adoption-competency training for community mental health professionals who want to serve adoptive families, as well as for clinicians working

in post-adoption programs and residential treatment centers. We must increase the number of therapists trained to work with children exiting from foster care and provide pathways to strengthen the pool of these professionals at the community level. There is a great need for therapists in California who truly understand and are prepared to treat the kind of complex psychological and neurobehavioral issues that characterize so many of these boys and girls, and know how to support their adoptive parents in their efforts to preserve their families.

Of equal importance, we must empower adoptive parents to advocate for themselves and their children. This knowledge will help them identify qualified professionals in the community and empower them to be more informed and effective consumers of clinical services.

AB 1790 recognizes these needs and forms a group of qualified stakeholders to identify barriers that prevent families from having access to specialty mental health providers with specialized adoption and permanency training and experience, and makes recommendations to rectify the situation. This bill will increase the stability of and strengthen adoptive and guardianship families.

I strongly urge your support.

Thank you.

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