

Date of Hearing: June 16, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Alex Lee, Chair

SB 1051 (Menjivar) – As Introduced February 12, 2026

SENATE VOTE: 37-0

SUBJECT: Foster care: childcare

SUMMARY: Authorizes childcare navigators to make referrals to the county welfare department (county) for eligibility and approval under the Emergency Childcare Bridge Program for Foster Children (Bridge Program). Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Authorizes a childcare navigator from a resource and referral (R&R) program to refer foster children to the county for eligibility and approval under the Bridge Program.
- 2) Requires participating counties to determine eligibility of a child referred from a childcare navigator for the Bridge Program.
- 3) Makes technical and conforming changes.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the Bridge Program as a county opt-in program with the purpose of stabilizing foster children with families at the time of placement by providing a time-limited payment or voucher for childcare following the child's placement and providing the family with a childcare navigator to assist the family in accessing long-term subsidized childcare. (Welfare and Institutions Code [WIC] §11461.6)
- 2) Authorizes payments to be provided either directly to the family or childcare provider, or through a contract with a local alternative payment program to distribute vouchers for childcare. (WIC § 11461.6(c))
- 3) Requires participating county welfare departments to determine eligibility of a child for the Bridge Program using the following criteria:
 - a) A family placement eligible to receive payment or a voucher for childcare includes both of the following:
 - i) Approved resource families and families that have a child placed with them in an emergency or for a compelling reason, as specified; and,
 - ii) Parents under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court, including, but not limited to, nonminor dependent parents.
 - b) A participating county welfare department may provide a payment or voucher if work or school responsibilities preclude resource families from providing care under certain circumstances, as specified. (WIC § 11461.6(d))

- 4) Requires each child receiving a monthly childcare payment or voucher to be provided with a childcare navigator who shall work directly with the child's family, social worker, and the child and family team to assist in accessing childcare at the time of placement as well as long-term, subsidized childcare for the child, as necessary. (WIC § 11461.6(e))
- 5) Provides that childcare R&R programs, established to serve a defined geographic area, shall provide a common set of services. Requires childcare R&R programs to be provided to all persons requesting services and all types of childcare providers, regardless of income level or other eligibility criteria. (WIC §§102219, 10222)
- 6) Requires R&R programs to provide a common set of services, including, but not limited to, provision of a childcare navigator to support children in foster care and children of parents involved in the child welfare system, among others. Provides that a childcare navigator shall work with the child's family, child's social worker, and the child and family team to assess childcare opportunities appropriate to the child's age and needs, assist the family in identifying potential opportunities for an ongoing childcare subsidy, assist the caregiver in completing appropriate childcare program applications, and develop an overall, long-term childcare plan for the child. (WIC § 10219(5)(A)(i))
- 7) Requires each R&R program to develop and enter into a memorandum of understanding (MOU), contract, or other formal agreement with the county in order to facilitate interagency communication and, to the maximum extent possible, to leverage federal funding to enhance navigation support. Alternatively allows an R&R program to explain in writing, annually, why entering into a formal agreement with the county is not practical or feasible. (WIC § 10219(5)(A)(ii))

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Senate Committee on Appropriations, pursuant to Senate Rule 28.8, the introduced version of this bill would result in negligible state costs.

COMMENTS:

Background: *The Emergency Child Care Bridge Program for Foster Children* was established to stabilize foster children with families at the time of placement by providing a time-limited payment or voucher for childcare, and by connecting the family with a childcare navigator to assist in accessing long-term subsidized childcare. The program is administered at county discretion and allows participating counties to determine eligibility and provide payment directly to the family or childcare provider, or contract with a local alternative payment program to distribute vouchers at regional market rates.

Eligible placements include approved resource families, families with emergency or compelling-reason placements, and parents under juvenile court jurisdiction, including nonminor dependent parents. A child receiving a monthly payment or voucher is eligible for up to six months, with a possible six-month extension at county discretion if long-term subsidized childcare has not been secured, and a further extension beyond 12 months upon a showing of compelling reason, including where loss of the payment or voucher would jeopardize a reunification or permanency plan. The Bridge Program is not an entitlement, and no federal approval obligation exists independent of the California Department of Social Services' (CDSS) obligation to seek Title IV-E reimbursement to maximize state and local funding.

An emergency placement of a foster youth necessitates the use of the Emergency Bridge Program. When a working parent suddenly receives a child late at night and must report to work the following morning without any pre-arranged childcare, this program can assist. It is also vital when an infant or toddler is abruptly placed in a home, requiring an immediate, short-term childcare voucher to bypass standard six-month waitlists and keep the placement from being disrupted.

Without timely childcare support, some foster parents risk losing employment, which threatens placement stability. Compounding this issue is social worker turnover. A recent state audit of Alameda County documented that from FY 2019–20 to 2024–25, vacancy rates doubled to 34% for child welfare workers and reached 18% for supervisors. The sponsors and Author assert that these high turnover rates mean overwhelmed or inexperienced staff often forget to inform families about the Bridge Program and say that because only social workers can currently initiate the voucher process, eligible families are frequently left without childcare assistance.

Childcare resource and referral programs, administered under the Child Care and Development Services Act by CDSS, serve defined geographic areas and provide a range of services including referrals to licensed childcare facilities, documentation of service requests, technical assistance to providers, and trauma-informed training for providers working with children in foster care. Existing law requires each R&R program to provide a childcare navigator to support children in foster care, children previously in foster care who have returned to their home of origin, and children of parents involved in the child welfare system, including children who meet Bridge Program eligibility criteria. Navigator eligibility is not contingent on receipt of a childcare payment or voucher. As a condition of receiving navigator funds, R&R programs must enter into an MOU or formal agreement with the county child welfare agency to facilitate interagency communication and, to the maximum extent possible, leverage Title IV-E administrative funding or explain annually in writing why such an agreement is not practicable.

This bill allows R&R navigators to submit childcare voucher referrals directly to counties for approval. While social workers retain final eligibility authority, *this bill* allows navigators to proactively connect families to eligible resources when they contact R&R networks.

Author’s Statement: According to the Author, “When foster families and parenting youth call Resource and Referral agencies seeking child care, they are connected with a Bridge Navigator who can direct them to available resources. While they can certainly share the information, there is no direct coordination pathway to work with the county child welfare to help streamline approval of this child care voucher. [This bill] would empower Bridge Navigators, who are well-positioned within Resource and Referral agencies, to submit referrals to county child welfare agencies to obtain approval for a child care voucher for an eligible foster child under the Emergency Child Care Bridge Program. It will streamline and strengthen the original intent of the Bridge Program by ensuring lack of access to child care is not a barrier to keeping children in safe, stable family home.”

Equity Implications: The provisions of *this bill* would allow bridge navigators to provide information about the Bridge Program directly to social workers in an effort to eliminate information gaps in accessing child care vouchers for foster parents who have taken on a placement. The California Health and Human Services California Child Welfare Council’s 2022-

23 annual report¹ noted the benefits that the Bridge Program has had on the families served. At the time of the report, 48 counties participated in the Bridge Program and noted that it enabled not only resource parents, but also family members who had agreed to care for children they were not expecting to care for. The Bridge Program increased the likelihood of parent caregivers accepting a child into their home, “with 40% of them responding that they would not have accepted a child without the program.” Most notable was that the caregivers shared that child care navigator services and access to childcare alleviated their overall stress, as well as their economic and emotional stress, as the Bridge Program supported the child's needs, provided necessary, consistent routines, and built strong bonds, which ultimately improved their outcomes socially, cognitively, and physically.

Arguments in Support: A coalition of supporters writes, “[This bill] would allow Bridge Navigators to submit referrals to county child welfare agencies for their approval of a voucher for an eligible foster child. Social workers would retain full authority to determine eligibility, but they would no longer be the sole gatekeepers to initiating the process. The bill will alleviate some of the pressure on social workers and allow another trusted partner working with the child and family to leverage this critical support.”

Arguments in Opposition: None on file.

RELATED AND PRIOR LEGISLATION:

SB 187 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review), Chapter 50, Statutes of 2022, a budget trailer bill, authorized counties to extend eligibility for the Bridge Program monthly payment or voucher beyond 12 months based on a compelling reason that may include, but is not limited to, the inability of the foster child to successfully transition to other subsidized child care, the loss of the payment or voucher would jeopardize a successful reunification or permanency plan, or other reasons authorized pursuant to guidance issued by CDSS.

SB 89 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review), Chapter 24, Statutes of 2017, a budget trailer bill, established the Bridge Program as a county opt-in program, effective January 1, 2018.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Alliance for Children's Rights (Co-Sponsor)
 California Child Care Resource and Referral Network (Co-Sponsor)
 Child Care Alliance of Los Angeles (Co-Sponsor)
 Child Care Resource Center, INC. (Co-Sponsor)
 Children Now (Co-Sponsor)
 County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) (Co-Sponsor)
 Crystal Stairs, INC. (Co-Sponsor)
 Thriving Families California (TFC) (Co-Sponsor)
 All for Kids
 Aspiranet

¹ <https://www.chhs.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/FINAL-2022-23-CWC-Annual-Report-051524-Remediated-FB.pdf>

California Alliance of Caregivers
California Alliance of Child and Family Services
California State Association of Counties (CSAC)
Child Action
EveryChild California
Family Resource and Referral Center of San Joaquin
First 5 LA
GRACE Institute - End Child Poverty in CA
Kidango
Options for Learning
Unite-LA (UNREG)
YMCA of San Diego County

Opposition

None on file.

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