

Date of Hearing: April 21, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
Ash Kalra, Chair
AB 2767 (Ahrens) – As Introduced February 20, 2026

PROPOSED CONSENT

SUBJECT: JUVENILES: FAMILY FINDING

KEY ISSUES:

- 1) SHOULD COUNTY CHILD WELFARE AND PROBATION DEPARTMENTS BE REQUIRED TO ENGAGE IN FAMILY FINDINGS PRIOR TO FILING A PETITION IN DEPENDENCY COURT?
- 2) SHOULD COUNTY CHILD WELFARE AND PROBATION DEPARTMENT PERSONNEL HAVE ACCESS TO A MINOR'S CASE FILE FOR PURPOSES OF CONDUCTING FAMILY FINDING?

SYNOPSIS

When a child is subject to abuse or neglect and is ordered removed from their home by a court, county welfare agencies are required to engage in a process called “family finding.” Family finding is an umbrella term that includes efforts by a social worker to contact the child’s family in order to make every effort possible to keep the child in the home of a family member or nonrelative extended family member. Studies have consistently found that dependent children who are placed with relatives or nonrelative extended family members experience vastly superior outcomes, including higher rates of reunification with their parents, than those placed into foster homes with strangers. In some cases, social workers may engage in family finding activities before a petition is filed with the dependency court, although this practice is not consistent between county agencies. This bill seeks to require local county welfare agencies to engage in family findings as soon as the child is accepted for services, before a petition is filed. Of particular note to this Committee, this bill grants county child welfare and probation department personnel access to the minor’s juvenile case file, which is sealed and only available via a lengthy petition process except to enumerated entities.

This well-intentioned and ambitious bill touches on an issue that relevant stakeholders largely agree on – to the extent possible and where relevant, social workers should engage in family findings at the earliest possible point to ensure a child is placed in a family member’s home. However, the bill requires family findings as soon as the child is accepted for services, potentially implicating circumstances where a parent may be proactively seeking support from the county agency. In these cases, it seems ill-advised to require a social worker to notify family members of the parent and child’s potential contact with the child welfare system. Additionally, to the extent the child’s juvenile case file contains highly personal and sensitive information, authorizing county child welfare and probation departments to access the file seems arguably overbroad. The author has agreed to amend the bill to address these concerns. Due to timing constraints, this analysis will reflect the bill as currently in print but will discuss the amendments in the comments, and the amendments will be processed by the Assembly Committee on Human Services that will hear the bill next, should it be approved by this Committee. This analysis

discusses these points in detail and provides suggestions on how to more narrowly tailor the relevant provisions.

This bill is sponsored by the Youth Law Center. It enjoys support from the Alliance for Children's Rights, the California Alliance of Caregivers, the California Alliance of Child and Family Services, and Indivisible California Statestrong. California Indian Legal Services has submitted a position of support if amended. There is no known opposition.

SUMMARY: Requires local county welfare agencies to engage in family finding activities as soon as the child is accepted for services. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires a social worker upon the initiation of child welfare services when a child is accepted for services, to conduct, within 30 days, an investigation in order to identify and locate all grandparents, parents of a sibling of the child, if the parent has legal custody of the sibling, adult siblings, other adult relatives of the child, including any other adult relatives suggested by the parents, and, if it is known or there is reason to know the child is an Indian child, any extended family members.
- 2) Specifies that family finding for the purpose of establishing due diligence in investigating the names and locations of relatives, as well as any parent and alleged parent, means conducting an investigation, including, but not limited to, through a computer-based search engine, to identify relatives and kin and to connect a child or youth, who may be disconnected from their parents, with those relatives and kin in an effort to provide family support and possible placement and includes the following:
 - a) Conducting outreach to identified relatives and kin using multiple modalities, including, but not limited to, telephone contact, written notice, electronic communication, home visits, and appropriate use of social media and internet-based resources, subject to the information-sharing requirements; and,
 - b) Notifying relatives and kin of all of the following:
 - i) That the child is or may be entering foster care or receiving child welfare services;
 - ii) Available options to participate in the care and placement of the child;
 - iii) Services and supports available to relatives and kin and if it is known or there is reason to know that the child is an Indian child, "family finding" also includes contacting the Indian child's tribe to identify relatives and kin; and,
 - iv) Requirements to become a foster family home or approved placement.
- 3) Requires the family finding activities required by these provisions to be initiated within 30 calendar days of either the child's removal from physical custody or when a child is accepted for services, whichever occurs first, that family finding activities to be ongoing throughout the life of the case unless discontinued as specified.
- 4) Defines "child is accepted for services" to mean the decision by a county child welfare or probation department, based on the needs and problems of the child or family, to admit or

receive the child or family as clients of the agency. This includes, but is not limited to, the following situations:

- a) An emergency response referral is substantiated or determined by the child welfare agency to require services;
 - b) The child receives services through a diversion program, or is under court supervision but is still living at home, and is determined by the probation or child welfare agency to be at risk of removal from parents;
 - c) The family enters into a voluntary family maintenance or family reunification services agreement;
 - d) The child is placed in voluntary out-of-home care;
 - e) A prevention services case is opened;
 - f) The child is detained or removed from parental custody; or
 - g) The court orders the provision of services.
- 5) Specifies, notwithstanding confidentiality provisions in existing law, county child welfare and probation departments are explicitly authorized to disclose the following information to relatives and kin for the purposes of family finding activities and requires the following information to be provided to all identified relatives and kin:
- a) The fact that a child has entered or may enter foster care or is receiving child welfare services;
 - b) General information about options to participate in the care and placement of the child;
 - c) Available services, supports, and resources for relatives and kin;
 - d) Requirements and process to become a foster family home or approved placement; and,
 - e) Contact information for the assigned social worker or other county personnel.
 - f) Authorizes the following information to be provided to all identified relatives and kin after verification of relationship and determination that sharing the information services the best interests of the child:
 - i) The child's first name only, unless using the full name is necessary to identify which child is involved and doing so serves the child's best interests;
 - ii) The approximate location where services are being provided by city or region, not by specific address;
 - iii) The general nature of the safety concerns that led to agency involvement, for example, "neglect," "physical abuse," or "substance abuse," without disclosing specific details that would violate privacy or compromise safety;

- iv) The child's general well-being and current placement setting type; and,
 - v) Opportunities to visit or have contact with the child, subject to court orders or safety assessments.
- 6) Prohibits the following information from being provided to identified relatives and kin unless authorized by court order or consent from the family of origin, with consideration of the child's wishes when age and developmentally appropriate:
- a) Specific addresses of placements, parents, or other protected locations;
 - b) Detailed case file contents, reports, or assessments;
 - c) Mental health records protected under current state law;
 - d) Substance abuse treatment records protected under federal law;
 - e) Medical records protected under federal law;
 - f) Information that would compromise child's safety or the safety of others; and,
 - g) Information about parents or other parties beyond what is necessary for family finding purposes.
- 7) Requires county personnel, before making disclosures, to do all of the following:
- a) Take reasonable steps to verify the claimed relationship;
 - b) Assess whether sharing information with that individual serves the child's best interests;
 - c) Consider any safety concerns, protective orders, or prior findings of abuse or neglect involving the individual to whom the information is to be disclosed; and,
 - d) Document the verification and assessment in the case file.
- 8) Authorizes county personnel to use social media platforms, internet search engines, public record databases, and other electronic resources to identify and locate relatives and kin and requires, and when using social media for outreach, requires county personnel to do all of the following:
- a) Use private messaging only and shall not make public posts about the child or case;
 - b) Limit identifying information about the child;
 - c) Not post photographs or videos of the child;
 - d) Document all social media contacts in the case file;
- 9) Requires information obtained through social media research to be verified through traditional means before being relied upon for placement decisions;

- 10) Requires CDSS, within 180 days of the effective date to develop training for county personnel on the information sharing authorizations and limitations, the verification and assessment requirements, the social media and electronic resource standards, and best practices for balancing transparency with privacy protection. Requires CDSS to make this training available to all counties and requires all county child welfare and probation personnel who conduct family finding activities to complete the training within 180 days of the training becoming available or within 60 days of assignment to family finding duties, whichever is later.
- 11) Permits a county agency to discontinue active family finding activities for a child under the following circumstances:
 - a) A court has made a specific determination that continued family finding no longer serves the best interests of the child or poses a threat to the child's safety based on credible evidence of a specific safety threat;
 - b) For a child not under court jurisdiction, but who is accepted for services, the county agency has determined that continued family finding poses a threat to the child's safety based on credible, documented evidence. The county shall document the specific reasons for this determination in the case file;
 - i) The child is in a preadoptive placement and adoption proceedings have been commenced; or
 - ii) The child has reached 21 years of age and is no longer in foster care or receiving extended foster care services.
 - c) Requires the decision to discontinue family finding to be documented in the case file and reviewed at each case plan update;
 - d) Authorizes family finding activities to be resumed at any time if circumstances change or if previously unavailable relatives or kin become available.
- 12) Requires CDSS, within 180 days of the effective date of the act to do all of the following:
 - a) Issue an ACL or all-county information notice providing comprehensive guidance on implementing the family finding authorization and information sharing standards established by these provisions;
 - b) Develop and distribute standardized consent forms for use at child and family team meetings;
 - c) Create training materials and curricula for county child welfare personnel; and,
 - d) Establish quality assurance mechanisms to monitor implementation across counties.
- 13) Requires counties, within 270 days of the effective date of the Act to review and update their policies and procedures to conform to these provisions.
- 14) Provides that CDSS is authorized and directed to adopt emergency regulations to implement these provisions, including standards for verification of relationships, procedures for

information sharing assessment, and guidelines for appropriate use of social media and electronic resources in family finding.

- 15) Adds county child welfare and probation department personnel to the list of those who are authorized to inspect a juvenile case file for the purposes of conducting family finding activities authorized by existing law. Specifies that access and disclosure of information shall be limited to the information specified due to the determination to discontinue active family finding activities.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Provides that a child may be adjudged a dependent of the juvenile court if the child has suffered, or there is a substantial risk that the child will suffer, serious physical harm inflicted non-accidentally upon the child by the child's parent or guardian. (Welfare and Institutions Code Section 300. All subsequent statutory references are the Welfare and Institutions Code.)
- 2) Provides that when a child is adjudged a dependent child of the court pursuant to 1) above, the court may limit the control to be exercised over the dependent child by any parent, guardian, or Indian custodian and shall by its order clearly and specifically set forth all those limitations. Any limitation on the right of the parent, guardian, or Indian custodian to make educational or developmental services decisions for the child shall be specifically addressed in the court order. Specifies that the limitations may not exceed those necessary to protect the child. (Section 361.)
- 3) Provides that when a child is removed from the physical custody of their parents pursuant to the above, preferential consideration shall be given to a request by a relative of the child for placement of the child with the relative. Specifies the factors that the social worker and court shall consider when determining whether placement with a relative is appropriate. (Section 361.3.)
- 4) Requires the court to review the status of every dependent child in foster care at least once every six months. Specifies that the court shall consider the safety of the child and determine the continuing necessity and appropriateness of the child's placement, as specified. (Section 366.)
- 5) Requires the court, after considering the evidence in the status review described in 4) above, to return the child to the physical custody of their parent or legal guardian unless the court finds, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the return of the child to their parent or legal guardian would create a substantial risk of detriment to the safety, protection, or physical or emotional well-being of the child. Requires the county social worker to file a supplemental report that addresses, among other things, the social worker's efforts to maintain relationships between the child and persons important to the child and the prognosis for returning the child to the physical custody of their parent or legal guardian. (Section 366.21.)
- 6) Requires, on and after October 1, 2021, for a child whose placement in a short-term residential therapeutic program has been approved, and, on or after July 1, 2022, for a child whose placement in a community treatment facility, that the supplemental report referenced in 5) to include ongoing assessments that the child's needs cannot be met by family members or in another family-based setting, and to include documentation of the intensive and ongoing efforts to prepare the child to return home or to be placed with a fit and willing relative, legal

guardian, adoptive parent, tribally-approved home, or another appropriate family-based setting. (Section 361.1 (m), 366.22.)

- 7) Establishes the Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support Programs to provide, or contract for the provision of, multi-tiered, 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. (Sections 16546-16549.)
- 8) Requires that the juvenile court's findings in a juvenile case be entered in the form of a written record known as the "juvenile court record." (Section 825.)
- 9) Defines the "juvenile case file" as a petition filed in a juvenile court proceeding, reports of the probation officer, and all other documents filed in that case or made available to the probation officer, judge, referee, or other hearing officer and thereafter retained. (Section 827 (e).)
- 10) Provides that, unless a person is authorized to inspect a juvenile case file without a court order, the person seeking access to a juvenile case file must petition the juvenile court for the information. The court must afford due process to all interested parties before releasing a juvenile case file, including notice and an opportunity to file an objection. (Section 827 (a)(3).)
- 11) Provides that certain persons and agencies are authorized to inspect a juvenile case file without a court order. (Section 827 (a)(1).)
- 12) Prohibits an agency or a person authorized to receive a juvenile case file from disseminating the file or information relating to its content to persons not authorized to receive the information without prior approval of the presiding judge of the juvenile court, unless it is used in connection with and in the course of a criminal investigation or a proceeding brought to declare a person a dependent child or ward of the juvenile court. (Section 827 (a)(4).)

FISCAL EFFECT: As currently in print this bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS: California's child welfare system is tasked with ensuring the safety of children in the state at risk of abuse, neglect, or abandonment. The most desired outcome of the child welfare system is to keep or reunite children with their parents whenever possible. In circumstances where reunification is not appropriate, courts and social workers then look to place children in a variety of alternative placements, whether that is with a relative, an adoptive family, or with a guardian.

Dependency cases typically begin when someone makes a report of child abuse or neglect to a local child welfare agency. The report triggers a social worker with the agency to investigate the report and determine what actions are necessary to ensure the child's safety. If the social worker determines intervention is necessary, the agency files a petition with the dependency court to make the child a dependent of the court. Subject to the court's findings, the child either returns to the home (often with supervision), or remains in custody as the court holds a series of periodic dispositional hearings. Once a child is a dependent and placed into foster care, existing law requires the court to conduct a status review hearing at least every six months to consider whether the child can be returned to the custody of parents or guardians, or remain in foster care.

Families may also engage with a county agency prior to a petition being filed. Parents who are struggling may receive voluntary family maintenance or prevention services crafted to support the family and keep the child with their parent or parents.

The importance of placement within families. Studies have repeatedly shown that children in dependency overwhelmingly benefit from placement within their families. Children who are not placed with their families, whether it is a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or step-sibling, are often not only removed from contact with their families but also from their larger communities.

Additionally, placement within the child's family can help facilitate reunification efforts with their parent or parents. Relative of kin placements can range from placement in a family's home while still under the legal custody of a state to a guardianship or even a formal adoption by a family member. These family-based placements can help minimize trauma, increase placement stability, improve behavioral outcomes, and promote stronger relationships with the child's community and culture. (*Kinship Care and the Child Welfare System* (May 2022) Children Welfare Information Gateway and Children's Bureau available at: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/kinship-care-and-child-welfare-system/>.)

In order to maintain the family connections that provide children with these benefits, at each stage of the dependency process, the law creates a presumption in favor of placing children with "fit and willing relatives," unless the court finds that doing so would pose a substantial risk to the welfare of the child. Further reflecting this policy preference, four years ago AB 207 (Chap. 573, Stats. 2022) created the Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement, and Support Programs. (Welfare & Institutions Code Sections 16546-16549.) The Center and its programs provide training and technical assistance for county child welfare and probation departments to further the goal of placing foster youth with relatives whenever possible or, in the case of Native American children, with the child's tribe or in a tribally-approved placement. Several other provisions of the Welfare & Institutions Code require the courts to consider, and social workers and probation officers to document, their family-finding efforts.

While existing law seems to explicitly, and potentially only, authorize family findings once a dependency petition is filed with the court, some stakeholders believe best practice is to engage in family finding activities at the earliest point of contact, even before the petition is filed or a child is removed from their home. Through conversation with the sponsors, it appears that some California counties are already engaging in family findings prior to a petition or removal. The benefits of early family finding activities could be significant: rather than delaying contact with a willing family member until the child is well into a dependency proceeding and potentially already moved between multiple care environments, a social worker who is aware that a child is likely to enter dependency may get a jump start on the process, minimizing the risk of potential disruption to the child's life. Additionally, parents who reach out to their county agency for services may benefit from a form of family finding activities that help a social worker identify support systems for the parent and child.

According to the author:

As someone who has experienced instability at home, I know first-hand that stability comes with familial relations first and foremost. AB 2767 seeks to ensure that California's foster kids are kept in the front of the picture and connected with their families as fast as possible.

Though California has provisions on family finding for juveniles in the foster care system, there are disparities between jurisdictions as to when family finding can and should occur.

AB 2767 would provide explicit statutory authority for child welfare and probation agency staff to begin family finding at the earliest stage of a case, including at the time of removal or when a child is accepted for services.

Furthermore, AB 2767 codifies ongoing family finding within the life of a foster care case, with the continued goal of connecting children to as many relatives as possible. Regardless of where a child lives, it should be clear to social workers that they are able to begin family finding as soon as possible, and placing children with family rather than institutional settings ensures lifelong relationships can begin as soon as possible.

This bill seeks to clarify that county child welfare services should engage in family finding activities as soon as a child becomes a client of the county agency. As currently in print, however, the bill does not so much as provide authority and discretion to the agency but rather serves as a mandate.

Currently, the bill requires a social worker to conduct family findings upon the initiation of child welfare services when a child is accepted for services. The bill also provides an extensive list of requirements that a social worker must comply with when completing family finding activities. While the intent of this language is plain and laudable, it is potentially over-inclusive. As discussed previously, the child may become a client of a county agency when one or both parents are struggling, but have *proactively* reached out to the agency for support and services. In this case, it does not seem necessary or prudent to *require* a social worker to notify family members of the risk that the child may enter dependency proceedings.

Of particular note to this Committee, the bill amends Welfare and Institutions Code Section 827 to expressly authorize county child welfare and probation department personnel to access a minor's case file with the court. The case file contains information beyond the petition or other court documents – it may also include a social worker's notes, and any other information related to the minor's matter even if a petition is never filed with the court. Section 827 defines the case file to mean the petition, "reports of the probation officer, and all other records[.]" (Welfare and Institutions Code Section 837 (f).)

Existing law recognizes the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of juvenile case files about a youth's involvement in the foster youth or probation system in order to protect the privacy rights of the youth, including after the youth ages out of one or both of those systems. The Legislature has determined that only certain categories of persons should automatically have access to juvenile case records. All other persons who wish to view a juvenile case record must petition the court for permission to do so.

The sponsors of this measure have historically raised concern about further expanding the list of entities that may gain access to a minor's case file, seeking to protect the privacy of the minor to the greatest extent possible. The content of the juvenile case file is extremely personal and sensitive in nature, and as such persons who seek to access the case file are subject to a lengthy petition process. While it is likely that the case file would have relevant information to family finding activities, it seems overly broad to add county child welfare and probation departments access to the file, even when cabined for the purposes of family finding activities. Seeing as some counties already engage in some form of family finding activities prior to filing a petition, it is also not entirely clear that such authorization is necessary.

In order to address all of these concerns, the author has agreed to strike the current contents of the bill and instead amend Welfare and Institutions Code Section 16501 to require county agencies to develop a case plan for a child or family when either is accepted for services by a county child welfare or probation department, and explicitly authorize county agencies and probation departments to conduct family finding and engagement activities to support the goals identified in the case plan. The amendments also clarify that “family finding and engagement” refers to a broad range of efforts to identify and locate relatives and kin, and to foster and maintain connections between the child and those individuals who are or could be important sources of support, care, and permanency in the child’s life. The proposed amendments also clarify that “child welfare services” are provided in a variety of circumstances, including when a family enters into a voluntary family maintenance or reunification services agreement, a child receives services through a diversion program, or a prevention case is opened. In sum, these changes help ensure that family finding activities that occur prior to filing of a petition for removal are done in concert with the parent or parents whenever possible while also granting clear authorization for counties to engage in such activities ahead of filing a petition. Additionally, the author has agreed to modify the language in Welfare and Institutions Code Section 10850 to instead clarify that information from social services records about a minor who is receiving child welfare services can be disclosed to relatives and kin to the extent necessary to conduct these family finding and engagement activities, with the aim of providing welfare services and identifying support, care or resources for the child.

With the new angle proposed by the amendments, the expansion of Section 827 seems particularly unnecessary. Thus, the author has also agreed to strike the proposed language.

Due to timing constraints, these amendments will be processed by the Assembly Committee on Human Services which will hear the bill next should it be approved by this Committee.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: This bill is sponsored by the Youth Law Center. It enjoys support from the Alliance for Children’s Rights, the California Alliance of Caregivers, the California Alliance of Child and Family Services, and Indivisible California Statestrong. California Indian Legal Services has submitted a position of support if amended. The sponsors submit:

This bill ensures that family finding efforts begin as early as possible and continue throughout a young person’s involvement in the system. It also clarifies that these efforts apply to both child welfare and probation youth who are at risk of out-of-home placement, helping to close gaps that currently leave some young people without meaningful connection to family.

Importantly, AB 2767 aligns with current practice and federal expectations by emphasizing continuity rather than creating duplicative or burdensome new timelines. By reinforcing ongoing engagement with relatives and supportive adults, the bill supports better placement outcomes, reduces reliance on congregate care, and increases the likelihood of stable, permanent connections.

We have seen firsthand how family finding can change the trajectory of a young person’s life. In many cases, initial outreach may not immediately result in placement due to timing or family circumstances. But when efforts continue, relatives who were once unable to step forward are later able to provide safe, loving homes. AB 2767 ensures the system does not give up on those opportunities.

At a time when California is working to reduce reliance on group care and improve outcomes for system-involved youth, strengthening family finding is both a practical and necessary step. AB 2767 advances that goal by making clear that connection to family is not optional, it is essential.

California Indian Legal Services submits:

As currently drafted, AB 2767 raises concerns about how and when counties engage with families in cases involving Indian children. By requiring early and ongoing outreach to relatives, the bill may allow counties to begin building relationships and shaping placement expectations before Tribal consultation occurs. In Counties, this practice will place Tribes in a position that makes it more difficult to ensure that placement decisions reflect Tribal preferences and authority and follow the ICWA.

We are also concerned about provisions allowing disclosure of information for family-finding purposes. In cases involving Indian children, it is important that Tribes have visibility into and oversight of how information about their children and families is shared.

CILS respectfully recommends the following amendments to better align the bill with ICWA and support effective collaboration with Tribal governments:

Require Tribal consultation prior to or concurrent with family-finding outreach in cases where a child is or may be an Indian child

Clarify that family-finding efforts must be conducted in coordination with the Tribe in Indian child cases

Require agencies to consult with the Tribe regarding placement preferences before contacting relatives, and/or ensure relatives are informed that placement decisions are subject to Tribal consultation

Limit disclosure provisions to ensure appropriate Tribal oversight of information sharing involving Indian children and families

With these changes, AB 2767 can strengthen family-finding efforts while maintaining the role of Tribes in decisions affecting their children.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Youth Law Center (sponsor)
Alliance for Children's Rights
California Alliance of Caregivers
California Alliance of Child and Family Services
Indivisible CA Statestrong

Support If Amended

California Indian Legal Services

Opposition

None on file

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