

SENATE THIRD READING
SB 1051 (Menjivar)
As Introduced February 12, 2026
Majority vote

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).

Major Provisions

- 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.

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 resource and referral (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 a memorandum of understanding (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.

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.

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

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

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."

Arguments in Support

The coalition of co-sponsors 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. By enacting the changes in [this bill], the bill will strengthen the original intent of the Bridge Program, ensuring child care is not a barrier to keeping children in safe, stable family homes."

Arguments in Opposition

None on file.

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee on June 24, 2026, the California Department of Social Services indicates absorbable costs, if any.

Because the Bridge Program is a county-optional program, any costs incurred by counties resulting from this bill are not reimbursable by the state.

VOTES

SENATE FLOOR: 37-0-3

YES: Allen, Alvarado-Gil, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Choi, Cortese, Dahle, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Grove, Hurtado, Jones, Laird, Limón, McGuire, McNeerney, Menjivar, Niello, Padilla, Pérez, Richardson, Rubio, Seyarto, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Strickland, Umberg, Valladares, Weber Pierson, Wiener
ABS, ABST OR NV: Ochoa Bogh, Reyes, Wahab

ASM HUMAN SERVICES: 7-0-0

YES: Lee, Calderon, Alanis, Elhawary, Jackson, Celeste Rodriguez, Tangipa

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 15-0-0

YES: Wicks, Hoover, Aguiar-Curry, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Fong, Mark González, Krell, Pacheco, Pellerin, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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