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Governor signs bills to extend benefits for disabled foster kids

By Tom Chorneau
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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Thursday signed a package of bills intended to improve care for California's 77,000 foster children by extending benefits to kids with disabilities when they reach age 18 and improving access to health care and mental health services.

"These are bills that are going to help a lot of kids," said Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, whose bill, AB1331, was among those signed by the governor.

Evans' legislation will require counties to sign up eligible foster care children before they turn 18 for federal aid, with the idea that some of them might be able to continue receiving support after they become adults.

The federal government provides about half of the funding for foster care programs in California, with state and local governments sharing the remaining costs. But services vary substantially from county to county, and children's advocates have long complained about a lack of standards for licensing group homes and protections against abuse.

Several of the bills signed by Schwarzenegger are expected to help.

-- AB340, by Assemblywoman Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, requires the state to

establish a unified process for licensing foster homes.

-- AB1453, by Assemblywoman Nell Soto, D-Pomona (Los Angeles County), calls for pilot programs in two counties to try new ways of delivering outside services to foster care facilities that might encourage children to live without government support when they become adults.

-- SB785, by Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, and AB1512, by Assemblyman Alberto Torrico, D-Fremont, facilitate better access to health care and mental health services for foster children.

-- SB39, by Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, provides public access to some case files related to the death of a child while in a foster care facility.

"These are issues that have not captured much attention in the past," said Ken Berrick, executive director of the Seneca Center for Children and Families in San Leandro, a nonprofit agency that provides mental health services to troubled juveniles including foster children. "The fact that lawmakers like Steinberg and Hancock and others have taken notice - as well as the governor - it's huge."

Migden's bill was prompted by a loophole in current laws that protect the privacy of a foster child but make it difficult for advocates to get basic information about a foster child's death.

Steinberg said his bill, SB785, will help ensure that foster and adoptive children placed into homes outside their home counties will get mental health services.

Foster care advocates were disappointed that Schwarzenegger vetoed AB 149, by Assemblywoman Karen Bass, D-Los Angeles, which called for a new program for locating relatives of foster children who might serve as caregivers. The governor said the state already has such a program.

In other action Thursday, the governor signed Migden's legislation, SB962, which calls on the state to create a system to collect and store umbilical cord blood. Research shows that umbilical cord blood shows promise to treating as many as 70 blood diseases, including leukemia and sickle cell anemia.

For the second year in a row, Schwarzenegger vetoed a bill that would establish a five-year pilot program in several California counties to allow cultivation of "industrial hemp," which would have been defined separately from "marijuana" in state law.

Schwarzenegger said the AB684, by Assemblyman Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, would give growers a sense of security that their crop was legal under federal law - when it is not.

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