

2024-2025 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY



KERN COUNTY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

**Release Date
April 22, 2025**

KERN COUNTY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

Working with Limited Resources to Protect Children



Kern County Department of Human Services
Photo from County of Kern Website

SUMMARY:

The Kern County Department of Child Protective Services (CPS) is an important branch of the Kern County's Department of Human Services, dedicated to safeguarding the welfare and well-being of children and families within the county. Its mission is to protect children from abuse, neglect, and exploitation while working collaboratively with families, communities, and partner organizations to create safe and nurturing environments for children to thrive. CPS operates within the laws and guidelines of the State of California. It addresses reports of child abuse and neglect, assesses family situations, and takes appropriate actions to ensure the safety and welfare of children living in Kern County. The department provides services that range from family support to preventative care, to intervention and foster care placement when necessary. It also prioritizes family reunification whenever it is safe, emphasizing the importance of maintaining family bonds.

The 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) found that CPS is committed to transparency, respect, and accountability in its interactions with the public. Its team of skilled professionals, including social workers, case managers, and advocates, strive to uphold the rights and dignity of children and families while addressing challenges with compassion and diligence.

Through various resources, guidance, and support, CPS aims to empower families and contribute to the overall well-being of the Kern County community.

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:

Pursuant to Penal Code §925 and 925(a), the Grand Jury conducted an investigation into the operations and management of the Kern County Child Protective Services.

METHODOLOGY:

The 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury researched topics on methods used for reporting child abuse, actions taken, types of funding, and overall effectiveness of CPS staff and other partnering agencies. Site visits were made to the Jamison Children's Center and Children's Network Dream Center to observe the day-to-day process and care provided to Kern County's children in crisis. Social workers and administrative staff were also interviewed.

DISCUSSION OF FACTS:

- A. Reports of child abuse or neglect may be made anonymously by the public and mandated reporters (e.g., teachers, healthcare professionals, school bus drivers, counselors, daycare operators, etc.) (Appendix A).
- B. According to the November 2024 Kern County Child Welfare Services Report (Appendix B):
 - Emergency Response – Family referrals received increased 6% from previous year
 - Emergency Response – Child referrals received increased 9%
 - Emergency Response – Breakdown of Dispositions
 - Sexual Abuse, increased 81%
 - Physical Abuse, increased 104%
 - Severe Neglect, increased 200%
 - Emotional Abuse increased 471%
 - Jamison Center - Number of Children Admitted decreased 25%
 - Jamison Center – Protective Custody and/or New Intakes decreased 34%
- C. Case workers need a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social work or a related field, such as psychology, sociology, or human services. Some positions may require a master's degree in social work or equivalent (e.g., work experience) for advanced roles.

- D. Social workers receive orientation and training upon hire. The training includes CPS Policies and Procedures, understanding child welfare laws, family dynamics, risk assessment, and procedural guidelines. They also receive training in identification of substance abuse and domestic violence. Annual mandated training sessions are provided through the State.
- E. Changes to the Policies & Procedures are reviewed at monthly staff meetings.
- F. CPS faces challenges of recruiting and retaining social workers due to high caseloads, emotional stress, and competitive job markets. Exit interviews with former staff suggest burnout, insufficient compensation, and a lack of career advancement opportunities are key factors driving turnover.
- G. CPS has subcontracts in place with non-profit agencies to help with client field visits, due to social workers' heavy caseloads.
- H. Caseworker performance is monitored through case reviews, supervisory oversight, and periodic training evaluations. Supervisors perform routine audits of case files to verify adherence to protocol.
- I. CPS uses performance metrics aligned with state and federal guidelines, such as the Child and Family Services Review metrics. These include:
 - Response timelines to child abuse or neglect reports
 - Placement stability for children in foster care
 - Re-unification rates and timelines for children exiting foster care system
 - Recurrence rates of abuse or neglect
 - Compliance with safety plans and visitation schedules
- J. CPS collaborates with local organizations, schools, and healthcare providers to identify and address cases of child abuse and neglect. Partnerships include formal agreements or informal collaborations with entities such as hospitals, mental health providers, law enforcement, and educational institutions.
- K. CPS engages in public awareness campaigns and educational outreach to inform the community about child abuse, how to identify the signs, and the reporting procedures. Materials such as brochures, workshops, and online resources are used to disseminate information.
- L. CPS has a formal process for receiving and addressing feedback or concerns through 24/7 hotlines, emails, and in-person visits. Complaints and concerns are reviewed by supervisors, and responses are typically provided in a set time frame.

Standardized intake forms and interviews help gather comprehensive information during the initial report phase.

- M. Statewide Policies and Procedures outline the process for responding to reports of child abuse and neglect. It requires the statewide use of the “Structured Decision Making” tool with a required response time and home visitation program.
- N. Multidisciplinary teams are frequently utilized to coordinate efforts and streamline interventions for children and families. Emergency removal decisions are typically made collaboratively by the CPS workers, supervisors and law enforcement. Emergency removal occurs when a child is in imminent danger.
- O. CPS funding is primarily tax based, supplemented with State and Federal grants. Kern Regional Center¹, in collaboration with CPS and through funding by California Department of Developmental Services (DDS), provides specialized services.
- P. Most of CPS fundings are earmarked for specific programs and therefore CPS does not have full control of how the money is spent.
- Q. CPS has faced legal challenges related to allegations of inadequate investigations, wrongful removal of children, or procedural errors. Complaints are typically addressed through internal reviews, corrective action plans, and/or legal settlements.
- R. CPS investigations often involve resistance from family members who may fear legal repercussions or loss of custody, delaying response times and investigations, increasing risk to the child(ren) and complicating case resolutions. Legal limitations restrict CPS’s ability to compel cooperation, unless clear evidence of abuse or neglect exists.
- S. CPS investigations include notifying families of allegations, ensuring their right to be heard, and providing clear information about legal processes. Families are typically given the opportunity to participate in case plans, attend hearings, and provide evidence or testimony.
- T. CPS provides contact information for the State Ombudsman and a civil rights pamphlet to help family members. It adheres strictly to confidentiality laws, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

¹ Private nonprofit regional center contracted by the State of California through the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) to coordinate community-based services and support for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.

- U. Kern Medical's contract is in place for medically fragile cases. Investigations of medical and mental health cases are handled by doctors and counselors.
- V. If children over the age of three are removed from the home, parents have up to 18 months for reunification. Their progress is monitored every six months. If a parent fails to make progress, a judge may terminate parental rights. Once rights are terminated, a parent has the right to appeal within 60 days. Then the child is moved to the adoption phase after being assessed by CPS. The entire adoption phase can take up to two and one-half years to three years. The Welfare & Institutions Code §361.3(b) allows relatives to petition for custody if they choose to intercede.
- W. Adoption for special needs children are provided for by Intensive Services Foster Care, a state agency, in collaboration with CPS.
- X. The Kern County Network for Children (Dream Center) is operated by the Kern County Superintendent of Schools in collaboration with CPS. It has formed a network with multiple social and government agencies such as:
 - Kern County Probation Department
 - Independent Living Program – California
 - Foster Youth Services

Dream Center services include:

- meals
- hygiene
- counseling
- help with homework
- tutoring
- assistance with college applications and enrollment for financial aid
- housing assistance

Résumé assistance, electronic benefit transfer (EBT), bus passes, and medical care are just a fraction of the other services provided by the Dream Center in collaboration with Kern County Human Services Department.

- Y. The Jamison Children's Center provides housing, medical, and/or emotional care for children while they are being assessed for foster care or reunification with their parent(s) or caregiver(s). It was recently remodeled to include playgrounds and a park for recreation to meet the needs of children. It is one of only two county shelters in California recently awarded a federal grant for excellence. Funding is provided by various sources (e.g., County, State, Federal, grants, and community support).

- Z. Promotional teams at the Jamison and Dream Centers work towards public awareness and solicitation of donations through print, electronic and social media (e.g., monthly “Adoption Day” news conferences, “Holiday Cottage” at Christmas, “Child Abuse Prevention” month, etc.). The Dream Center publishes a Wish List. This list contains needed day-to-day items for children and foster youth up to 25 years of age (Appendix D).

FINDINGS:

The Kern County Grand Jury finds:

- F1. Kern County Child Protective Services (CPS) has a 24/7 hotline that ensures reports can be submitted promptly.
- F2. To avoid harm, children in an unsafe environment are removed by CPS. Refer to Juvenile Dependency Flow Chart (Appendix C).
- F3. Training and qualifications ensure that caseworkers have the foundational knowledge necessary for effective case management.
- F4. Despite required training, on-the-job scenarios can vary widely, and case workers may lack real-time support for complex or high-stress situations. This may cause added on-the-job stress and higher turnover rates.
- F5. Recruitment efforts may be improved by fully leveraging tools like targeted social media campaigns or partnerships with educational institutions.
- F6. Inadequate retention of staff disrupts CPS’s continuity of care for families; this may lead to increased costs associated with hiring and training new employees.
- F7. Staff shortages create higher caseloads per staff member, which hinders supervisors’ ability to perform thorough reviews, possibly impacting consistency and performance monitoring.
- F8. The lack of competitive salaries has led to high staff turnover. This may have exacerbated the workload of the remaining staff resulting in burnout.
- F9. Collaboration with local organizations, schools, and healthcare providers appears to enhance early identification of abuse or neglect and improve CPS’s resource allocation for families.
- F10. Not all community members are aware of the reporting process for child abuse or neglect; nor are they confident in CPS’s ability to intervene effectively. Due to language barriers, some members of the community may not fully understand available resources.

- F11. Insufficient client access to family support services (e.g., training programs, community resources, etc.) hinders CPS's ability to address root causes of child welfare issues, which can potentially lead to delays in moving cases forward.
- F12. CPS uses the "Structured Decision Making" tool (a questionnaire completed by CPS) to determine if a child is in imminent danger. This can lead to the caseworkers' determination whether a child should be removed from their home.
- F13. Social workers are challenged by varying response times from law enforcement, leading to a safety issue for both the children in crisis and the social worker.
- F14. There is inadequate funding for Kern Regional Center through the California Department of Developmental Services to carry out its responsibilities.
- F15. CPS faces limited funding flexibility, with a significant portion of funds earmarked for specific programs, thereby restricting the ability to address emerging needs dynamically.
- F16. With the increase in reported cases of child abuse and neglect, the current budget allocation is not allowing CPS to fully carry out its increasing responsibilities.
- F17. CPS faces issues of lack of trust and perceived biases which can contribute to non-cooperation among some families.
- F18. Due to delays in addressing complaints and insufficiency in the follow-up process, there is frustration among parents and/or caregivers.
- F19. Response times have shown improvement in high-priority cases but remain inconsistent in non-emergency situations.
- F20. Limited transparency due to confidentiality laws about the outcomes of complaints and legal cases can impact public trust.
- F21. CPS has expanded training programs for social workers to identify and address substance abuse and domestic violence more effectively. Partnerships with local organizations have been enhanced to provide targeted support.
- F22. Costs of running the Jamison Center and providing necessary services, including utilities, may limit their ability to make improvements within the facility.

COMMENTS:

The 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury would like to thank the management and staff of the Kern County Child Protective Services, and the staff of Jamison and Dream Centers, for their cooperation in the investigation. The Grand Jury is thankful for the immeasurable help in answering questions, providing statistical detail reports, and accommodating tours of the Jamison Center and Dream Center.

CPS works hard to serve Kern County. They partner with allies and other members of the community to protect the needs of children and families. The CPS team shows creativity, flexibility, and resilience. They strive to emulate the theme of “Compassion plus Action”.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. CPS work with the Kern County Board of Supervisors (BOS) to conduct a salary survey by May 31, 2025, to determine if salaries and benefits of CPS social workers are competitive. (Findings #5 through #8)
- R2. CPS work with BOS and the Kern County Human Resources to hire additional social workers by August 30, 2025. (Findings #5 through #8)
- R3. By September 30, 2025, CPS work with local colleges to create a specialized program to include undergraduate students in the scholarship, grant or tuition reimbursement programs. This should be designed with the goal for graduates to work for CPS. (Findings #5 through #8)
- R4. By July 31, 2025, CPS work with Kern County Human Resources to conduct job fairs with emphasis on attracting qualified individuals. (Findings #5 through #8)
- R5. CPS work with Kern County Department of Human Services to enhance the availability of support services for clients by July 31, 2025. (Findings #11, #17, and #21)
- R6. CPS develop more comprehensive ongoing training modules for staff to address specialized topics like trauma-related care and cultural diversity by September 30, 2025. (Findings #3, #4, and #21)
- R7. By July 31, 2025, CPS work with Kern County Human Resources to determine if private sector temporary employment services could be utilized to conduct in-house general office duties, to increase social workers’ time and/or ability to manage priority issues. (Findings #7, #8, #16, and #18)

- R8. By July 31, 2025, CPS work with California Department of Developmental Services, to secure funding for the Kern Regional Center remodel. This will increase building space needed to better care for special needs children. (Findings #14 and #15)
- R9. By July 31, 2025, CPS work with Kern County General Services to secure grant funding for solar panels at Jamison Children's Center to reduce utility costs. (Findings #15 and #22)
- R10. Provide caseworkers with more extensive training in de-escalation techniques and effective communication strategies to ensure coordinated and respectful intervention practices and develop clear protocols for managing uncooperative individuals by September 30, 2025. (Findings #3, #4, #10, and #17)
- R11. Expand outreach strategies, including social media and digital platforms, to increase visibility and accessibility of information about child neglect and abuse prevention, and reporting incidents by September 30, 2025. (Findings #1, #10, and #17)
- R12. Conduct an analysis of non-emergency case timelines to address and rectify specific causes of delays by October 31, 2025. (Findings #9 through #11)
- R13. DHS work with the BOS to allow for CPS discretionary spending authority starting with the 2025-2026 Fiscal Year by May 31, 2025. (Finding #15)

NOTES:

- The Kern County Child Protective Services should post a copy of this report where it will be available for public review.
- Persons wishing to receive an email notification of newly released reports may sign up at: <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>
- Present and past Kern County Grand Jury Final Reports and Responses can be accessed on the Kern County Grand Jury website: <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>

RESPONSE DEADLINE:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 60 DAYS FROM:**

Kern County Department of Human Services
Findings #1 through #22
Recommendations #1 through #13

Kern County Child Protective Services
Findings #1 through #22
Recommendations #1 through #13

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS FROM:**

Kern County Board of Supervisors
Findings #1 through #22
Recommendations #1 through #13

- **INVITED RESPONSE WITHIN 60 DAYS FROM:**

California Department of Developmental Services
Finding #14
Recommendation #8

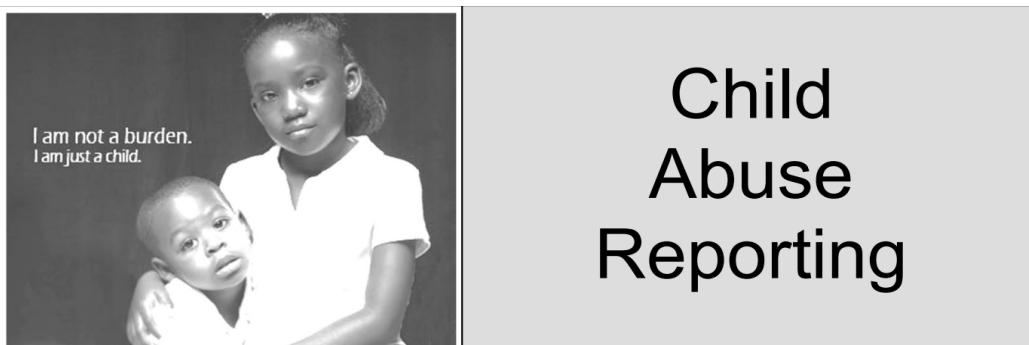
RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED PURSUANT TO PENAL CODE §§933(c) AND 933.05:

- **PRESIDING JUDGE
SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF KERN
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**
- **FOREPERSON
KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**

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| Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Cal. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury. |
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APPENDICES:

APPENDIX A



Who is a Mandated Reporter

Who is a Mandated Reporter? A teacher, instructional aide, teacher's aide or assistant, an employee of any school, a classified employee of a public school, an administrative officer or supervisor of child welfare, an administrator of a public or private day camp, youth center, youth recreation program or organization, a licensee, administrator or employee of a child day care facility, an employee of a county office of education or the State Department of Education whose duties bring the employee in contact with children on a regular basis, a licensee, a HeadStart teacher, a licensing worker or licensing evaluator employed by a licensing agency, public assistance worker, foster parents, group home personnel, social worker, probation officer, parole officer, school district police or security department, an administrator, presenter, or counselor in a child abuse prevention program, a district attorney investigator, inspector, or local child support agency caseworker, a peace officer, firefighter, health professionals (physician, surgeon, psychiatrist, psychologist or assistant, dentist, resident, intern, podiatrist, chiropractor, licensed nurse, dental hygienist, optometrist, marriage and family and child counselor or trainee, paramedic, state or county public health employee that treats a child, coroner or medical examiner), child visitation monitor, an animal control or human society officer, a clergy member (Priest, Minister, Rabbi, Religious Practitioner, or similar functionary of a church, temple or recognized religious denomination or organization), any employee of any police, sheriff's, probation, or welfare department, a commercial film and photographic print processor (any person who develops exposed photographic film into negatives, slides or prints), a CASA employee or volunteer, an alcohol and drug counselor, a clinical counselor trainee, an employee or administrator of a public or private postsecondary educational institution, an athletic coach, athletic administrator, or athletic director, a commercial computer technician, any athletic coach, including assistant coach, or a graduate assistant involved in coaching, at a public or private post-secondary educational institutions, an individual certified as a foster family agency home, or resource family. (PC11165.7)

APPENDIX B

Child Welfare Services November, 2024

| EMERGENCY RESPONSE | Current Month | Prior Month | Year Ago | Fiscal Yr. 2020/2021 | % Change 1Year |
|--|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------|
| Emergency Response referrals received - Families | 882 | 900 | 830 | 5784 | 6% |
| ER Referred for Investigation | 580 | 572 | 596 | 3813 | -3% |
| ER Evaluated Out | 302 | 328 | 234 | 1971 | 29% |
| Emergency Response Referrals Received - Children | 1336 | 1319 | 1224 | 8837 | 9% |
| ER Referred for Investigation | 756 | 729 | 671 | 4998 | 13% |
| ER Evaluated Out | 580 | 590 | 553 | 3839 | 5% |
| Breakdown of Dispositions (ER, Phone Room, Court Intake) | 1405 | 1469 | 1070 | 9414 | 31% |
| Sexual Abuse | 121 | 115 | 67 | 909 | 81% |
| Physical Abuse | 165 | 185 | 81 | 1198 | 104% |
| Severe Neglect | 63 | 17 | 21 | 184 | 200% |
| General Neglect | 982 | 1076 | 871 | 6686 | 13% |
| Emotional Abuse (also Domestic Violence Cases) | 40 | 43 | 7 | 222 | 471% |
| Exploitation | 3 | 5 | 5 | 29 | -40% |
| Caretaker Absence / Incapacity (also Pos Tox) | 12 | 20 | 17 | 128 | -29% |
| At Risk, Substantial Risk, Invalid | 19 | 8 | 1 | 58 | 1800% |
| JAMISON | | | | | |
| Number of Children Admitted to Jamison | 94 | 101 | 126 | 658 | -25% |
| Protective Custody/New Intakes | 76 | 86 | 115 | 545 | -34% |
| Change of Placement | 18 | 15 | 11 | 113 | 64% |
| Children Released from Jamison | 95 | 119 | 114 | 660 | -17% |
| Average Days in Jamison | 2.5 | 2.5 | 1.5 | 14.9 | 67% |
| Admissions - Breakdown by Age | | | | 0 | |
| 0-5yrs | | | | | |
| 6-12yrs | 29 | 36 | 53 | 253 | -45% |
| 13-18yrs | 33 | 35 | 39 | 201 | -15% |
| | 32 | 30 | 34 | 204 | -6% |
| COURT INTAKE | | | | | |
| Number of Children Referred for Investigation | 59 | 72 | 71 | 746 | -17% |
| Law Enforcement Agency (LEA) | 59 | 44 | 38 | 622 | 55% |
| Child Protective Services (CPS) | 0 | 28 | 33 | 124 | -100% |
| Number of Families Referred for Investigation | 58 | 41 | 50 | 292 | 16% |
| Number of Petitions Filed (Children) | 37 | 41 | 49 | 301 | -24% |
| FM / FR / PP / ST | | | | | |
| Number of Families Receiving Family Maintenance | 134 | 141 | 165 | 943 | -19% |
| Number of Children Receiving Family Maintenance | 288 | 299 | 342 | 1981 | -16% |
| Court-Ordered FM - Children | 212 | 216 | 270 | 1424 | -21% |
| Voluntary FM - Children | 32 | 45 | 42 | 353 | -24% |
| Number of Children in Out-of-Home Placement (FR/ PP/ST) | 2084 | 2065 | 2138 | 12389 | -3% |
| Family Reunification | 644 | 625 | 666 | 3787 | -3% |
| Permanent Placement | 1170 | 1167 | 1256 | 7034 | -7% |

| | | | | | |
|--|-----|-----|-----|------|------|
| Supportive Transition | 270 | 273 | 216 | 1568 | N/A |
| Number of Children Reunified with Parents | 17 | 18 | 22 | 143 | -23% |
| Number of Children Referred for Adoptive Study | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | * |

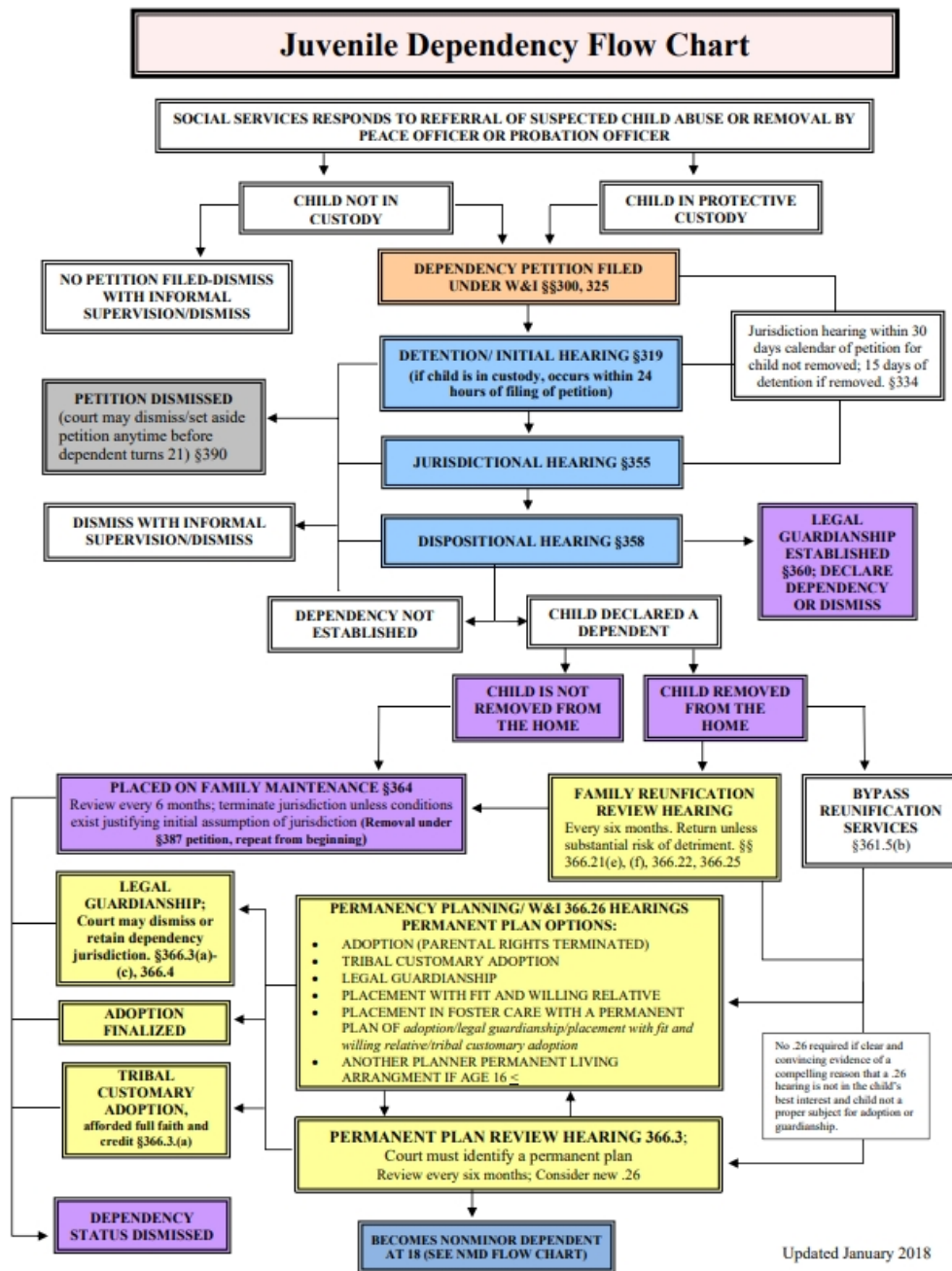
ADOPTION

| | | | | | |
|--|-----|-----|-----|------|------|
| Total Number of Children in Adoptive Study Number of Children Free, Not Placed | 511 | 488 | 598 | 3092 | -15% |
| | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | * |
| Number of Children Under Study, Not Free | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | * |
| Number of Finalized Adoptions | 20 | 12 | 12 | 102 | 67% |
| Number of New Adoptive Placements | 37 | 52 | 12 | 198 | 208% |

LICENSING

| | | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|----|
| Number of Licensed Homes | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | * |
| Number of Foster Care Applications Pending Number of Resource Family Homes (RFH) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | * |
| | 1156 | 1129 | 1160 | 6799 | 0% |

APPENDIX C



APPENDIX D



Kern County Network for Children **The**

Dream Center Wish List

Donations of new or gently used items make meaningful differences for Kern's current and former foster youth.

Infants & Toddlers

- Clothes
- Diapers & wipes

1 Clothing Supplies

- 2 • Socks (all adult sizes)
- 3 • T-shirts (sizes M, L, XL)
- 4 • Pajamas/sleepwear (all sizes)
- 5 • Young women's underwear (all sizes)
- 6 • Men's belts
- 7 • Men's boxers (all sizes)
- 8 • Sweatshirts (all sizes) (white,
- 9 Grey, black)
- 10 • Sweatpants (all sizes) (white, grey, black)
- 11 • Men's and women's clothing (all sizes casual and dress)
- 12 • Shoes

13 Hygiene Supplies

- 14 • Individual shampoos, soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes
- 15 • Deodorant (non-aerosol)
- 16 • Combs/hairbrushes
- 17 • Personal care items for women

18 Food Items

- 19 • Individually wrapped snacks (granola bars, fruit snacks, trail mix)
- 20 • Bottled beverages and reusable water bottle containers
- 21 • Emergency food items (soups, tuna, peanut butter, cereal, etc.)
- 22 • Blankets

All donations to the Kern County Network for Children's Dream Center are deductible for income tax purposes to the extent allowed by law.