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Settlement Reached with Los Angeles County to Provide Foster Youth with Vital Mental Health Services

Latest settlement comes 18 years after initial settlement of a lawsuit alleging the LA County foster system was not providing necessary mental health services for youth in its care

Los Angeles, CA — The County of Los Angeles has entered into a new settlement of a longstanding lawsuit, [*Katie A v. Bontá*](#), where it has made a number of commitments to significantly increase intensive home and community based mental health services for thousands of children and youth involved with the County’s foster care system.

The lawsuit, originally filed in 2002, is a federal class action lawsuit against Los Angeles County and its Department of Children and Family Services, as well as California’s Department of Social Services and Department of Health Care Services. The suit challenged the County and state agencies for neglecting their duties to provide necessary and legally mandated health care services to treat the mental health conditions of children. Separate settlement agreements were reached with both the state and LA County in the case.

“We have been working on this case for almost two decades now,” said Robert Newman, an attorney for Western Center on Law & Poverty. “To end the lawsuit, the County has agreed to implement several new initiatives to ensure that foster children can remain in their current homes and communities.”

The County first settled the lawsuit back in 2003 and agreed to provide mental health services, then a long monitoring process began. Over time it became clear that the County was not providing the services it agreed to, so Plaintiffs filed a successful motion in 2009 to enforce the original settlement provisions. Last year, the County filed a motion to end the case.

“We have worked on this case for many years because it was clear that foster youth in LA County, especially those with serious mental disorders, were not getting the services they needed,” said Melinda Bird, Senior Litigation Counsel at Disability Rights California. “We had to keep fighting.”

Because of the lawsuit, the County has implemented a number of reforms since 2003 in the delivery of child welfare and mental health services. This week’s settlement focuses on foster youth who have more intensive but unmet mental health needs, such as those who have experienced placement disruptions, psychiatric hospitalizations, or have been placed in group homes, such as Short Term Residential Treatment Programs.

“The Katie A. case has led to tremendous reforms,” said Ira Burnim, Legal Director at Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law. “We are pleased that additional progress will be made before the case ends.”

The County has agreed to implement new measures to provide specialty mental health services, including Intensive Care Coordination and Intensive Home Based Services, over the next nine months. As this is a class action lawsuit, the settlement will require court approval.

“This new agreement with Los Angeles County specifically targets the outstanding actions needed to ensure children and youth get the services and supports they are entitled to and help them succeed,” said Kim Lewis, Managing Attorney for the National Health Law Program.

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[About Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law](#) -- The Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law has advocated for the civil rights, full inclusion and equality of adults and children with mental disabilities. We were pivotal in expanding the civil rights movement to include fighting discrimination against, and segregation of, people with mental disabilities. The Bazelon Center uses a unique combination of litigation, public policy advocacy, coalition building and leadership, public education, media outreach and technical assistance—a comprehensive approach that ensures we achieve the greatest impact.

[About Disability Rights California \(DRC\)](#) is the agency designated under federal law to protect and advocate for the rights of Californians with disabilities. The mission of DRC is to advance the rights, dignity, equal opportunities, and choices for all people with disabilities.

[About National Center for Youth Law](#) -- The National Center for Youth Law is a non-profit law firm that helps low-income children achieve their potential by transforming the public agencies that serve them.

[About National Health Law Program](#) -- The National Health Law Program advocates, educates, and litigates at the federal and state levels to protect and advance health care access and the civil rights of low-income people and other underserved groups.

[About Western Center on Law & Poverty](#) -- Through the lens of economic and racial justice, Western Center on Law & Poverty fights in courts, cities, counties, and in the Capitol to secure housing, health care and a strong safety net for low-income Californians.