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## **Governor Signs AB 1702 to Protect Sexually Exploited Minors**

*New Legislation Allows Additional Safeguards for Sexually Exploited Children and Youth*

(Oakland, CA)- California children who are sexually exploited received additional protections yesterday when Governor Jerry Brown signed a bill allowing courts to deny reunification to parents or guardians who knowingly participated in, or permitted, the sexual exploitation of a child who is brought into the child welfare system.

Authored by Assembly Members Mark Stone (D-Monterey Bay) and Brian Maienschein (R-San Diego), AB 1702 provides a crucial protection for children and youth. AB 1702 will offer additional flexibility to child welfare agencies and juvenile court judges in deciding whether reunification services should be provided to a parent and provide additional legal protections to foster youth who have been victims of exploitation. In addition, the bill contains protections for parents who may have also been victims of abuse and were coerced into permitting, or participating in, their children's exploitation.

"I am proud that Alameda County played a leadership role in co-sponsoring AB 1702 along with the County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA)," said Lori Cox, Social Services Agency Director for Alameda County. "The sexual exploitation of minors is a national and regional crisis." AB 1702 will assist the local agency along with human services agencies and juvenile courts throughout California in protecting children from further abuse and exploitation.

The sex trafficking of children is a serious problem in California. The metropolitan areas of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego have all been rated as "high intensity" areas for child sex trafficking by the FBI. It is known that the majority of children who are commercially sexually exploited are foster youth, who can become particularly vulnerable to perpetrators. In response, several laws have been passed in recent years that provide either additional protections against sexual exploitation or services to foster youth who have already been exploited. One such law, Senate Bill 855 (Statutes of 2014), created the Commercially Sexually Exploited Children program for foster youth, which is now being implemented by county child welfare agencies throughout the state including Alameda County. Although substantial progress has been made, these efforts do not provide specific protections to ensure that counties can seek to avoid attempting to reunify youth who have been sexually exploited with a parent who perpetrated or allowed the crime to occur.

"This new law is an important new weapon in our ongoing fight against the sexual exploitation of children," said Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson, who chairs the County's Personnel, Administration and Legislation (PAL) committee. "We are proud of the central role Alameda County is playing in this fight and that these efforts have once again resulted in expanded protections for children."

AB 1702 will help child victims like Jill (name changed for her protection). She was just 11 years old when she was admitted for a week-long hospitalization for an untreated sexually transmitted infection (STI). Before this hospital admission, Jill had not been to a doctor since she was an infant. In addition, she was never enrolled in school.

Jill's isolation, lack of medical care despite an STI, and lack of schooling were among the indicators that a social worker at a hospital identified as possible sexual exploitation and triggered a call to the county social services agency. Additionally, while in her mother's care, Jill was regularly visited by an adult friend of the family, who would take her to see "friends" and provide her money twice a month, which was her family's only reported source of income. Jill reported that on one occasion she was taken to a park by the "friend" and sexually assaulted by two other men in the park's bathroom.

Jill was also sexually assaulted by a family friend while sleeping at a family member's home. Although she informed her parents of the incident, the man continued to visit Jill and her mother at their home. Neither of Jill's parents reported these assaults to law enforcement and her mother later blamed Jill for her entrance into foster care. Jill disclosed that her mother told her to "keep secrets."

"AB 1702 is one more way we can provide the utmost care and protection for children who suffer the unimaginable trauma of child sex trafficking. Ensuring human services agencies can petition a court and judge to avoid reunification when it's clear a child will only suffer further is critical to the child's healing and recovery," said Frank Mecca, CWDA Executive Director." We thank the Governor, Legislature and leadership of Assembly Member Stone and Assembly Member Maienschein for the work being done to protect children who are victims of sex trafficking."

Without the protections in AB 1702, the county child welfare agency could have been required to attempt reunification with her mother, who knowingly permitted this sexual exploitation to occur. AB 1702 authorizes a child welfare agency to ask the juvenile court to deny reunification services to parents like Jill's. Without this protection, a human services agency can be ordered to pursue reunification between a child and his or her parent, even though that parent participated in the child's exploitation.

"I am pleased that our bill to provide protection for sexually exploited children in foster care passed through the legislature and was signed by the Governor," said Assembly Member Maienschein. "It is never acceptable for a child to be abused or exploited and this legislation is an important step in preventing more abuse from happening."

"Vulnerable children who enter foster care deserve to rebuild their lives free from abuse," said Assembly Member Stone. "This new law will help ensure that the system does not punish abused minors for the crimes of their abusers."

AB 1702 will help ensure that Jill and other children like her are not at risk of further exploitation at the hands of their parents or guardians. The cosponsors thank the Assembly Members and Governor Brown for recognizing and supporting this needed legislation.

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