

Statement by SEIU Local 521 on the Findings and Recommendations of the Social Policy Institute presented to the Kern County Board of Supervisors.

A Call to Invest in Children, Families, and Protect Frontline Staff.

Tuesday, July 28, 2026

On behalf of the Social Workers, Social Worker Supervisors, and office support staff represented by SEIU Local 521 in Kern County Child Protective Services, we commend the Social Policy Institute at San Diego State University for its professionalism, thoughtful analysis, and commitment to improving outcomes for Kern County's vulnerable children and families.

The Institute's Child Welfare System Assessment confirms what frontline workers have been reporting for years: **sustained investments in staffing, training, supervision, and workforce support are essential to protecting children and strengthening families.**

Unfortunately, these recommendations are not new. Time and again, Kern families, frontline employees, and grand juries have raised these same concerns in public hearings, budget discussions, and meetings with county leadership. Rather than heed these warnings, the Board continues to deprive CPS of necessary and available resources.

It is also concerning that workers who advocate for improvements to Child Protective Services and working conditions that support child safety may feel discouraged from raising legitimate concerns. When the expertise and lived experience of frontline social workers are not meaningfully considered, the county loses an important source of insight for strengthening services and improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

For these reasons, we believe it is necessary to remind the Board that the need for these investments has been raised repeatedly over many years, and why urgent action is now mandatory.

1. Past Litigation

- a. A lawsuit was filed in **January 2024** alleging “chronic problems and inadequacies” in Kern County’s CPS system, including failing to “ensure that caseworkers were adequately trained and supervised” and “had manageable caseloads,” from August 2019 to September 2022.¹

2. SEIU members’ statements

- a. On **March 5, 2025**, thousands of Kern County workers went on strike for the first time in the county’s history.²

¹ See claim filed 1/23/2024 ([Summons and Complaint in the matter 2529979.pdf](#)).

² <https://www.seiu521.org/521-news/kern-county-workers-make-history-thousands-strike-on-march-5-2025>

- i. “We're understaffed, we're overworked, and we can't keep up with the demands of the community, and that's something that the Board of Supervisors is not recognizing. It has to be addressed,” said Alicia Aleman, SEIU 521 Chapter President and DHS Social Worker.³
 - ii. “We’re severely understaffed. We hire people and they’re gone within the month or two [and that makes our] caseloads high. We have time constraints and don’t have the time to thoroughly address the needs of our community. Sometimes it feels like we’re checking boxes instead of changing lives.” Raquel Heard, Kern County CPS Social Worker Supervisor, and SEIU 521 Member.
- b. On **April 8, 2025**, the Board received a white paper from SEIU, which warned the Board that children face “**alarming risks under the County's child welfare system**” and that Kern County children with prior allegations of maltreatment were **288% more likely to die** than the statewide average.⁴
- 3. Grand jury response
 - a. On **April 22, 2025**, the Board of Supervisors received an independent Grand Jury report, which found that Kern County CPS “faces challenges of recruiting and retaining social workers due to high caseloads, emotional stress, and competitive job markets.”⁵
 - b. The Grand Jury recommended that “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.”⁶
 - c. Employee retention, workload, and service quality issues are interrelated. Vacancies generated by turnover increase the workload for remaining employees, which can have a domino effect. However, the Board did not take this recommendation seriously.
 - d. On **July 15, 2025**, the Board reported that the recommendation required “further analysis.”⁷ California Penal Code Section 933.05 (b)(3) requires the County to complete and discuss its analysis within six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury’s report. However, when SEIU requested the County’s analysis six months later, in October 2025, the County could only produce a salary study completed in 2019.
- 4. The funds for investments are available.
 - a. 2011 Realignment dollars fund a wide variety of services, including but not limited to child welfare services, adult protective services, mental health and recovery services, and homelessness services.⁸
 - b. Kern County’s 2011 realignment fund⁹ balance is “excessive,” as defined by the State Auditor.

³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20250719091949/https://www.turnto23.com/news/in-your-neighborhood/bakersfield/kern-county-union-workers-one-day-strike-underway>

⁴ [Board Receipt of SEIU Local 521 White Paper \(April 8, 2025\)](#) pg 4-5

⁵ [Kern County FY 2025 Grand Jury Report: “Kern County Child Protective Services – Working with Limited Resources to Protect Children” \(April 22, 2025\)](#)

⁶ See R1 [Kern County FY 2025 Grand Jury Report: “Kern County Child Protective Services – Working with Limited Resources to Protect Children” \(April 22, 2025\)](#)

⁷ See R1. [Kern County Board of Supervisors Response to CPS Grand Jury Report \(July 15, 2025\)](#) pg 4

⁸ CA Constitution art XIII § 36

⁹ Kern County’s 2011 realignment fund is named “County Local Revenue Fund.”

- c. According to the State Auditor, even if a county takes “a more conservative approach to its [2011 realignment] reserves, based on our review of the funding variances from year to year, the county’s reserve **should not exceed 25% of the previous year’s revenues.**”¹⁰
- d. According to Kern County’s FY 2025 ACFR, the 2011 realignment fund balance exceeded 25% of the previous year’s revenues by more than \$102 million.¹¹

5. Budget cuts

- a. Despite the County’s excessive reserves and repeated reports of understaffing in CPS and other 2011 realignment programs, the County is cutting CPS staff for the third consecutive year – including cutting one of two CPS investigator positions.

In conclusion, our frontline social workers are committed to this work. Every day we find creative ways to help families in unimaginable crises despite limited resources. But dedication alone cannot solve systemic challenges.

As you consider the report’s recommendations, we urge this Board and Social Policy Institute to bring frontline social workers to the table.

This report presents another opportunity for the Board of Supervisors to act. We urge you to move beyond acknowledging the challenges and commit to the investments and partnership with frontline workers necessary to build the child welfare system Kern County’s children, families, and taxpayers deserve.

The staff closest to the work can help identify practical, cost-effective solutions that improve outcomes and ensure public resources are used wisely.

¹⁰ <https://information.auditor.ca.gov/pdfs/reports/2020-102.pdf#page=109>

¹¹ Compare total revenues, actual on a budgetary basis, for FY 2024 (<https://www.auditor.co.kern.ca.us/cafr/24CAFR.pdf#page=133>) with Fund balances, June 30, 2025, actual on a budgetary basis, for FY 2025 (<https://itsapps.kerncounty.com/clerk/minutes/bosagenda/2588772/2588815/2588816/2588905/2588970/2588970.1.pdf#psge=140>).