



ASSEMBLY MEMBER — DISTRICT 57
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AB 2126: Peer Employment Equity Reform (PEER) Act

SUMMARY

AB 2126 strengthens California's child welfare workforce by reducing hiring barriers for peer partners in community-care licensed settings, such as childcare centers.

The bill creates a background check exemption for peer applicants who are current or former foster youth and whose offenses occurred before age 21. Serious violent or child-related felonies are still excluded.

BACKGROUND

Peer partners play an important role in child welfare, behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems. They use their lived experience in foster care to help families navigate complex systems. Research shows that peers improve engagement, strengthen stability, and support outcomes like reunification and staying in school.

However, community-care licensed facilities must follow strict background check rules. Applicants with a criminal record must go through a lengthy exemption review process. This delay especially affects former foster youth, many of whom have nonviolent offenses tied to trauma or instability during adolescence.

Currently, applicants with a record must show "substantial and convincing evidence" of rehabilitation. The process can take up to fourteen months. Many people cannot wait that long for employment, leading to the loss of qualified peer workers.

Federal and other state guidelines recognize that youth-age offenses should not permanently block employment for peer providers and allow more flexible, risk-based approaches. California's current system has not fully adapted to reflect the growing role of peer workers. This bill would help ensure lived experience is valued while maintaining safety standards.

ISSUE

Many peer applicants, especially current and former foster youth, are unable to secure employment because they must wait months for an exemption-from-disqualification review if they have a criminal record.

This delay causes agencies to lose qualified applicants who could otherwise provide culturally responsive and effective support to youth and families.

SOLUTION

AB 2126 creates a targeted, automatic background check exemption for peer applicants who are current or former foster youth and whose offenses occurred before age 21. Serious violent and child-related felonies are still excluded.

All existing fingerprint-based checks remain in place to ensure safety, while removing the exemption review process that can delay hiring for several months to over a year.

This change allows agencies to hire peer partners more quickly and enables individuals with lived experience to contribute to the workforce while maintaining safety protections.

SUPPORT

California Alliance of Child and Family Services (Co-Sponsor)
The Children's Partnership (Co-Sponsor)
Child Welfare Directors Association (Co-Sponsor)
The Alliance for Boys and Men of Color (Co-Sponsor)

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