

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **LADCFS, Foster Youth Advocates Reach Landmark Settlement; Statewide Implications Predicted**

*Foster child's death spurred three-year legal battle by Bay Area group*

**LOS ANGELES, OCTOBER 20, 2017** – Yesterday, the Los Angeles Superior Court finalized a settlement in a milestone lawsuit filed by three former foster parents and Advokids, a Bay Area legal advocacy non-profit for California foster children. Filed in August 2014, the suit alleges that the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (LADCFS) regularly failed to provide foster parents and relative caregivers with written notices of court hearings concerning children in their care, as required by law. This includes written notice and an opportunity to object and be heard when foster children are removed from their homes.

Advokids' Co-Director Margaret Coyne said the settlement has statewide implications. "We hope this lawsuit serves as a warning to other county welfare offices in California that foster parents' legal rights must be respected," said Coyne. "Advokids has demonstrated with this lawsuit that it will go the distance and use every legal remedy available when counties in California are not following the laws that were enacted to protect children's lives."

The judgment requires LADCFS employees to begin using a computer program designed to ensure that hearing notices and other forms are sent to current caregivers and their foster family agencies, informing them about upcoming court hearings involving foster children in their care. It also requires LADCFS employees to use an additional computer program to provide foster parents with seven-days advance notice of the agency's plan to remove a foster child from their home unless LADCFS has documented lawful reasons for not sending such notice.

The lawsuit was initiated after the tragic death of two-year-old Tori Sandoval in 2011, which spurred the caregiver community into action.

Tori entered foster care at birth, and after 10 months, she was moved to the home of foster-to-adopt parents Kelli and Terry Sedgwick. After eight months of caring for Tori, LADCFS failed to give the Sedgewicks a legally-required written notice about an upcoming court hearing where the court was to consider whether Tori should be returned to her biological parents.

"I had repeatedly warned Tori's attorney, social worker, and supervising social worker about my concerns for Tori's safety should she be returned to her troubled biological parents," Kelli Sedgwick explained. "Yet we received no court notifications. We were the ones caring for Tori day in and day out. We had the most information about Tori, yet we had no say during the critical hearing when the court was deciding Tori's fate."

Less than one year after Tori was returned to her biological parents, she was found dead of starvation and physical abuse at their hands.

Jan Sherwood, Co-Director of Advokids, reports that since Tori's tragic death, Advokids' free legal hotline has continued to receive calls from foster parents and caregivers throughout California who do not receive the legally required notifications of court hearings concerning the children in their care.

"L.A. County and the state of California face an alarming foster parent shortage," said Sherwood. "It's critical that we treat foster parents and relatives with respect if we wish to attract good people to care for the state's neediest children."

There are more than 55,000 children in California's foster care system, and more than one-third of these children are located in L.A. County.

The lawsuit is titled *Advokids et al. v. Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)*.

[Advokids](http://Advokids.org) is the only legal non-profit that operates a telephone hotline (877.238.4543) providing free legal information and support to anyone concerned about the well-being of a child in foster care or at risk of entering foster care in California. The organization is committed to protecting children from abuse, neglect and trauma by improving access to the juvenile courts and making sure that potentially life-saving information about children at risk is brought to the court's attention. For more information, visit [Advokids.org](http://Advokids.org).

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Foster mother Kelli Sedgwick is also available for interviews. Advokids can provide her contact information.