



Connie Beck, Director  
Social Services | Public Health | Mental Health

## news release

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### Foster care advocate leaving DHHS for state appointment

On March 28, Rochelle Trochtenberg will walk into her Sacramento office and get acquainted with her staff of 15 as she settles into her new role as California's foster care ombudsperson.

For the first time in California history, possibly the first time in the nation, the Office of the Foster Care Ombudsman will be held by a former foster youth.

"Child welfare was involved in my life as early as kindergarten," Trochtenberg said. "I was finally removed from my parents at age 13. After entering foster care I had over a dozen placements including foster homes, group homes, and locked facilities for children with serious mental health conditions."

At age 18, while still in high school, she was given a seven-day notice to move out, a bag of bus tokens and a handwritten list of homeless shelters and sent out into the world. "It was one of the loneliest times in my life," she said.

But, Trochtenberg also counts herself as one of the fortunate ones who eventually started getting support from people around her.

"Thankfully, with the help of several amazing adults that took a chance on me, I was able to navigate those first few years out of foster care and eventually made my way into college," she said. "From there, life really began to change."

Trochtenberg began working with the Humboldt County Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) in the beginning of 2008 as a one-on-one behavior support aid for youth at the Children's Center.

The following year, Trochtenberg graduated from Humboldt State University with a bachelor's degree, and in 2015 she completed her Master of Social Work. During her time at DHHS, Trochtenberg helped found the Humboldt County Transition-Age Youth Collaboration (HCTAYC) and supervised its Youth Advisory Board.

In her capacity with HCTAYC and DHHS's Transition-Age Youth Division over the years, Trochtenberg worked closely with the state's now-retired ombudswoman. The position sat vacant for about a year and recently someone close to Trochtenberg suggested she consider applying for it.

Soon, she was receiving letters of support from senators and decided to apply. "I have always felt (the ombudsperson) is such an important role for foster youth. Assuring that foster youth know their rights—it's something I really feel is in line with my values."

As ombudsperson, Trochtenberg will be responsible for educating foster youth about their rights. Her office is also in charge of investigating and resolving individual complaints and reporting on them to the legislature.

Retired DHHS Director Phillip R. Crandall said, "Rochelle shares the vision that foster youth deserve the same quality of care, love and future opportunities we give to our own children and will work hard to assure that occurs."

Sheryl Lyons, program manager with Child Welfare Services who has worked with Trochtenberg for the past couple years, said Trochtenberg works well with all the players in the foster care system, whether they are youth, administrators, co-workers or state legislators.

"This role, given her life experience, I think it's a great fit," she said. "She's very honest and respectful. She is going to be very honest with people at the state. As a former foster youth herself, obviously she is keenly attuned to these issues. She has a really gentle, respectful way of working with youth and knowing how to include them."

Cole Vanwey, a Youth Advisory Board member who has worked with Trochtenberg for the past 3 ½ years, said he considers her a mentor and someone he's been able to rely on. "She's a great advocate. This is great for the foster youth of California."

While she packs up her life in Humboldt County, Trochtenberg says leaving the county and DHHS is bittersweet.

"I'm most grateful to so many people here who have helped me grow and have given me advice and held me accountable," she said. "So many people who have brought youth voice into policy and decision making. I feel like I have really grown HCTAYC and grown up in HCTAYC. My professional career with HCTAYC has been a huge part of what inspired me to apply. It's been an amazing healing opportunity for me."



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