

California Hope, Opportunity, Perseverance, and Empowerment (HOPE) for Children Trust Account Program

Program Guide

Effective as of March 31, 2026



The California Hope, Opportunity, Perseverance, and Empowerment (HOPE) for Children Trust Account Act, Added by Stats. 2022, Ch. 569, Sec. 57. (AB 156) Effective September 27, 2022

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Introduction

The [California Hope, Opportunity, Perseverance, and Empowerment \(HOPE\) for Children Trust Account Program](#), established through [Assembly Bill 156](#) (Chapter 569, Statutes of 2022) and codified in Chapter 16.1 (commencing with section 18997.5) of the Welfare and Institutions Code (HOPE Act), aims to close the racial wealth gap and confront the issue of intergenerational poverty by creating a new financial investment program specifically catered to vulnerable children throughout the state (HOPE Program).

The HOPE Program provides financial support to youth who have lost a parent, legal guardian, or Indian Custodian to COVID-19 or who have spent at least 18 months in California's foster care system. Each eligible participant receives \$3,000, funded by the State of California. These funds can be used to build assets and promote economic independence. Participants also have access to free financial education and planning services to help them make informed choices.

This guide helps families, youth, and caregivers understand the HOPE Program and take steps to secure future assets. It explains how the program works, who qualifies, participants' rights and responsibilities, and how funds can be accessed and used.

Definitions

To help you understand the HOPE Program, here are key terms in plain language:

1. **Consequence of COVID-19 or Long-Term COVID:** Any illness or health problem recognized by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) or [California Department of Public Health \(CDPH\)](#) as caused by COVID-19.
2. **COVID-19:** Illness caused by any SARS-CoV-2 variant, recognized by the CDC or CDPH.
3. **Decedent:** eligible youth's parent, Indian custodian, or legal guardian who died during the federally declared COVID-19 public health emergency from COVID-19 or a recognized long-term effect of COVID.
4. **Domicile:** A person's true, fixed, and permanent home where they intend to return whenever away.
5. **Applicant:** Any eligible youth who submitted an application to the HOPE Program.
6. **Eligible Youth (Foster Youth):** The child was under 18 as of September 27, 2022, who has been placed into California or tribal foster care for over 18 months and is no longer receiving family reunification services. Or have been placed into foster care after age 16, and Family unification services have been terminated. **OR Eligible Youth (COVID Bereaved):** A California resident who lost a parent, legal guardian, or Indian custodian to

COVID-19 on or after March 1, 2020, and was under 18 at the time of death, and whose family income was at or below the Medi-Cal for Children limit.

7. **Program Enrollee:** Eligible youth enrolled in the HOPE Program and who have not ended their participation.
8. **Family Household Income:** The income of the household before the Decedent's death, as defined in WIC Section 18997.51(d)(1), is equal to or less than the Medi-Cal for Children threshold.
9. **Medi-Cal for Children:** California's Medicaid program under WIC Chapter 7 (starting with Section 14000).
10. **Financial Education and Services:** Available resources that teach money skills, including budgeting, saving, investing, using credit, protecting assets, and accessing programs that build income and wealth.
11. **Asset Exclusion:** Legal protection ensuring HOPE funds are not counted as income when determining eligibility for certain State benefits, such as [Medi-Cal](#), [SNAP \(CalFresh\)](#), and [Cal Grants](#).
12. **Low-Income Threshold:** Household income limit used to qualify COVID-bereaved children, generally based on the Federal Poverty Level or participation in programs like Medi-Cal.

Eligibility

Children and youth may qualify for the HOPE Program through one of two pathways:

Lost a Parent, Legal Guardian, or Indian Custodian to COVID

A child may be eligible if they meet the following:

- Lost a parent, legal guardian, or Indian Custodian to COVID-19 during the federally declared public health emergency (January 31, 2020, to May 11, 2023).
- The child was **under 18** and a California resident at the time of death.
- Before the COVID-related death, the family's household income met, or would have met, the **Medi-Cal benefits**.

Eligibility is verified using one of the following:

- A **death certificate**- death certificate with Covid list as the cause of death.
- **Medical documentation**-paperwork showing the date of death and COVID as the cause.

- A **signed statement** -under penalty of perjury from the surviving parent, legal guardian, or Indian custodian confirming the date and cause of death, along with documentation showing the decedent was diagnosed with or being diagnosed with COVID.

Received Foster Care Services

A child may be eligible if they meet the following:

- The child was **under 18** as of September 27, 2022.
- Been placed into California or tribal foster care for over 18 months and is no longer receiving family reunification services
- Or been placed into foster care after age 16, and parental unification services have been terminated.

NOTE: A child who later becomes a dependent or ward of the court under WIC Sections 300, 601, or 602—after reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship—does not need to complete another 18 months in care to remain eligible for additional HOPE deposits.

Eligibility is determined by the [California Department of Social Services \(CDSS\)](#).

Enrollment

Eligible Youth may self- enroll if they are over the age of 13. Any Eligible Youth under the age of 13 must be enrolled by a Parent/Legal Guardian/Indian Custodian.

HOPE staff work with the California Department of Social Services and Franchise Tax Board to verify eligibility. They also use information given by eligible youth, their parents, guardians, Indian custodians, tribal authorities, social workers, and community organizations to identify children and youth who may qualify. Once eligibility is confirmed, HOPE will enroll the youth, create a HOPE trust account, and make a one-time \$3,000 deposit into each account.

Disbursement

When the youth is 18, they will have the option to withdraw the funds or leave them invested for up to another eight years. They must withdraw the funds by the time they are 27 years old. Funds left after that time will be forfeited and returned to help capitalize other participant accounts.

Notification

HOPE will notify all Program enrollees—and if under 13, their parent, legal guardian, or Indian custodian—within two months of enrollment and annually thereafter. For youth eligible under WIC Section 18997.51(d)(2), notices may be sent through CDSS or tribal authorities. All other enrollees will receive notices directly by mail or email, depending on the enrollee’s selected method of communication.

Notices include:

- The amount deposited in the HOPE Account
- The first and last dates funds can be withdrawn
- Instructions for accessing financial education resources
- A description of rights and responsibilities

Denial and Appeals

If an applicant does not meet eligibility criteria, HOPE will send a Notice of Action by mail or email to the applicant and their surviving parent, legal guardian, or Indian custodian. Applicants—or their parent, guardian, or Indian custodian—may submit a written appeal within 60 calendar days of the denial notice.

Appeals must include:

1. The original Notice of Action (denial letter)
2. Letter explaining why the denial is incorrect
3. Any supporting documents not previously submitted

Within 60 calendar days from the date the appeal was received, HOPE staff will submit a final determination to the appellee or their surviving parent. An Indian custodian, or legal guardian, using the Notice of Action via mail or email, will either:

- Confirm the original denial of enrollment **or**
- Overturn the denial and enroll the applicant into the HOPE program.

More information on appeals is at [Frequently Asked Questions - HOPE](#).

1. Purpose

This Standard Operating Procedure describes how HOPE staff review appeals of eligibility determinations for the HOPE Trust Program. The appeals process ensures that decisions are accurate, consistent, and based on verified information. Any applicant who disagrees with a

determination can appeal.

2. Scope

This applies to all HOPE staff involved in:

- Reviewing applications that were declined
- Receiving and assessing appeal requests
- Requesting additional or corrected information
- Issuing appeal determinations and notices

3. Eligibility Review Categories

Applications must be reviewed and classified into one of the categories below:

A. Non-Qualifying Determinations (Final)

A denial letter would be issued, accompanied by an appeal. This final determination is based on the criteria listed below:

- Statutory ineligibility under the HOPE Act
- Age, placement, or eligibility pathway disqualification
- Missed statutory or program deadlines
- Requests for hardship, equity, or discretionary exceptions
- Disputes regarding statutory interpretation or program policy

Action:

Issue a final denial notice. Timeline of 60 calendar dates to be tracked by staff. No additional review or documentation is required.

B. Tentative—Procedural or Factual Issues

An application may be reviewed due to an issue that can be corrected or clarified through documentation or verification. Examples include:

- Missing, incomplete, or illegible documentation
- Correctable identity verification (CIP/KYC) issues
- Conflicting or inaccurate data
- Duplicate application errors
- Missing consent or required attestations
- System or administrative processing errors

Action:

Request additional documentation or clarification.

C. Pending—Additional Information Required

A final determination cannot be issued when eligibility cannot be confirmed based on the information available. Examples include:

- Conflicting eligibility data and supporting documents
- Unclear foster care or reentry eligibility timelines
- Court orders that conflict with reported information
- County, state, or system reporting delays

Action:

Place the application in pending status and request the required information.

4. Appeal Intake Process

When a response to an appeal is received, staff must complete the following steps:

1. Confirm the appeal was submitted within the allowable timeframe stated in the Notice of Action
2. Identify the original reason for denial
3. Classify the appeal under Section 3 (A, B, or C)
4. Document the classification and supporting rationale in the case record

5. Review Standards

All appeal reviews must follow these standards:

- No exceptions may be granted outside statute or program rules
- All decisions must be supported by documented evidence
- Staff may not substitute personal judgment for statutory requirements

6. Documentation and Notification

- All appeal determinations must be documented in the case record
- Written notice must be issued for every appeal outcome
- Notices must clearly explain the decision and outline any next steps, if applicable

7. Escalation

Appeals involving any of the following must be escalated for supervisory or legal review before a final determination is issued:

- Suspected fraud or misrepresentation
- Conflicting or unclear court orders
- Significant data discrepancies that cannot be resolved at the staff level

This Standard Operating Procedure describes how HOPE staff review appeals of eligibility determinations for the HOPE Trust Program. The appeals process ensures that decisions are accurate, consistent, and based on verified information.

Appeals are limited to factual or procedural issues. The HOPE Program does not allow discretionary, hardship-based, or equity-based exceptions outside of statute or program rules.

Withdrawing Funds

Funds in a HOPE trust account are available for withdrawal once the enrollee turns 18. Enrollees may choose to leave their funds invested until age 27. Funds will be mailed to enrollees upon completing the distribution process through the HOPE website.

Fund Utilization

HOPE funds are flexible under statute; there are no spending requirements. Enrollees may utilize funds for:

- Housing or a security deposit
- Transportation (for example, buying a car)
- Education or job training
- Health needs
- Starting a business
- Saving or investing for the future

Rights and Responsibilities

Participation in the HOPE Program involves a dual commitment: the right to transparent access to funds and information, and the responsibility to maintain your account and exercise sound financial judgment.

Rights

Program enrollees have the right to receive all eligible funds and services under the HOPE Program and to understand how the program works. They have access to their HOPE Account and control over how funds are used. Enrollees can request materials and customer service in the language they understand best, and their privacy is protected by law. They also have the right to learn about other financial programs available through the State Treasurer's Office or related resources, such as CalKIDS or CalABLE.

Responsibilities

Enrollees are responsible for keeping their contact information up to date, responding to program such as a Notice of Action, and submitting withdrawal requests starting at their 18th birthday and before their 27th birthday. They should use the HOPE dashboard to monitor their balance. Enrollees are expected to consider expert advice carefully, ask questions as needed, evaluate financial options and potential consequences before making decisions, and help protect the privacy of their accounts.

Support

The HOPE team provides professional support for all program participants.

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