September [\_\_], 2015

The Honorable Edmund G. Brown, Jr.

Governor of California

State Capitol

Sacramento, CA 95814

**Re: AB 900 (Levine) – Request for Your Signature**

Dear Governor Brown:

We respectfully request your signature of AB 900 (Levine), which will extend the jurisdiction of California Probate Courts to protect vulnerable unaccompanied and undocumented children. *[Insert description of organization in support of bill.]* We believe that this bill will align state law with federal law and provide crucial protection for immigrant youth in California.

AB 900 will give probate courts jurisdiction to appoint guardians for youth ages 18 to 20 in connection with a petition to make findings regarding Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), an important form of federal immigration relief for youth who have been abandoned, abused, or neglected by a parent. There are two main reasons that this change in the law is needed. First, many unaccompanied minors arriving to the United States have experienced high levels of trauma. In fact, a 2013 UNHCR survey of unaccompanied children from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, found that 58 percent were forcibly displaced because of harm they suffered or would face and which would indicate a need for international protection. This study was completed prior to the 2014 “surge” of such children, who, based on anecdotal evidence, have experienced harm at even higher levels. Extending jurisdiction so that older teens can have a legal guardian in the United States will give these children a fair shot at assimilating into life in the United States. A guardian is a vital safeguard because integration into a new society and culture is undeniably difficult and frightening, especially for those whose lives thus far have been marked by trauma, loss, and hardship.

Second, this bill will increase access to SIJS, a form of humanitarian immigration relief for abandoned, abused or neglected immigrant youth. To be eligible to even apply for SIJS with the federal government, a minor must first have findings from a state juvenile court of abuse, abandonment or neglect. SB 873, which you signed into law on September 27, 2014, made clear that California courts can and should make these findings. However, current California law provides that probate courts can only take and maintain jurisdiction of youths until the age of 18, while federal law allows children to apply for SIJS up until the age of 21. This results in a misalignment between state and federal immigration laws that denies youth ages 18 to 20 access to SIJS. AB 900 will align state law with federal law by providing our probate courts with jurisdiction over youth also petitioning for SIJS findings up until the age of 21. Not only will extending jurisdiction allow these children to apply for legal status, it will also help meet the ultimate goals of SIJS, which are not merely to enable vulnerable children to remain here legally, but to stabilize their legal immigration situation so that they can overcome the abuse, abandonment, or neglect they have suffered through the support of the state court and legal guardian.

Particularly in light of the recent influx of unaccompanied immigrant children arriving to the United States, including more than 8,000 of whom were released to family members or other adults in the state of California in Fiscal Years 2014 and 2015 (to date), this bill is crucial to protecting vulnerable unaccompanied immigrant children in the state of California. Further, it will facilitate their successful integration into and ultimate contribution to our larger community in cases where such youth are eligible for legal status through Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. This bill will ultimately lead to safety and stability for immigrant children in California, principles that are highly valued by our state.

We respectfully urge you to sign AB 900 into law.

Sincerely,

[NAME]

[TITLE]

[ORGANIZATION]

cc: Camille Wagner, Governor’s Office, Legislative Affairs Secretary

June Clark, Governor’s Office, Deputy Legislative Secretary

Assemblymember Marc Levine