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Advocates back effort to aid foster children

by Tom Strode, posted Wednesday, March 29, 2017 (23 hours ago)

WASHINGTON (BP) -- Advocates for children needing families voiced their approval of new federal legislation designed to improve the placement of children in quality foster care families at a time of increased demand for such homes.

The National Adoption and Foster Care Home Study Act, introduced March 21, would enhance the matching of children and families in the foster care system by establishing a national standard and database for increased uniformity and transparency. The measure would permit foster care and adoption agencies throughout the country to gain information about potential families through a secure process.

Introduction of the companion bills -- S. 684 in the Senate and H.R. 1650 in the House of Representatives -- followed a 2016 report that showed the number of children in foster care, nearly 428,000, marked a jump of three percent. The increase -- based on statistics compiled by the U.S. Children's Bureau on Sept. 30, 2015 -- was the largest in the last decade, according to the National Council for Adoption (NCFA). The report also showed the number of foster children waiting to be adopted grew to nearly 112,000, the most since 2009, NCFA reported.



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"Orphans and children in foster care are among the most vulnerable people in our entire culture," said Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. "As Christians, we have a clear biblical mandate not only to pray for them, but to take on their cause as one of our own, which the church is already doing in remarkable and often unseen ways."

A longtime adoption advocate, Moore told Baptist Press in written comments the new legislation "is a clear example of ways the government can make that process smoother and more accessible to those seeking to help these children. I am very thankful for this bipartisan effort to care for and support children who need families, and I pray that this law will swiftly come to the aid of the millions who need it."

The proposal's call for a national home study standard, as well as database, would work to alleviate the differences in home studies among the states and guarantee greater efficiency in matching foster and adoptive children with families, congressional sponsors said.

Jedd Medefind, president of the Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO), described the legislation as a "really positive" development.

"It will ensure a consistency and connectedness between state foster systems nationwide," Medefind told BP. Currently, there is "kind of a quilt work of different approaches to home studies," he said.

As a result, the quality of home studies varies by state, and the inconsistency this produces "makes it much harder" to pair foster children with families, Medefind said.

Chuck Johnson, NCFA's president, told BP in written remarks, "It's been a huge problem over the years how little states cooperate with each other to allow children to be adopted by approved and qualified prospective adoptive parents in another state.

"One of the reasons that states give for not working across jurisdictional lines is the differences in how sending and receiving states assess prospective adoptive families," he said. "So, a national home study assessment that still recognizes state rights is a desirable goal as far as we are concerned and will result in more children being adopted instead of languishing in foster care."

Some states have recently adopted initiatives to improve their foster care systems. For instance:

- Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin announced Oklahoma Fosters in November 2015, and the state met its goal of recruiting at least 1,000 new foster families by the end of June 2016.
- Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam launched Tennessee Fosters in December 2016 in an effort to enlist more families for children in foster care and to support foster families.
- Mississippi, in partnership with NCFA, is seeking to record and track prospective foster and adoptive families from their first interest in fostering or adopting through placement and adoption.
- Kentucky's General Assembly is considering a resolution to establish a task force to simplify the adoption process in the state and to cut costs.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., are the federal legislation's prime sponsors, while two Southern Baptists -- Sen. James Lankford and Rep. Steve Russell, both from Oklahoma -- are the lead Republican cosponsors.

"Foster children go through a lot of instability, disappointment, and even trauma, so we must step up and better care for the thousands of kids in our foster system," Lankford said in a written release. "To address many of the poor outcomes associated with the foster care experience, and to prevent the 'age out' crisis, we must work together to provide permanency and families for these children."

NCFA will hold a congressional briefing March 30 on its latest report, *Adoption: By the Numbers*. The report, released in February, includes these findings:

- The total number of adoptions in the United States fell from 133,737 in 2007 to 110,373 in 2014, with a 75 percent drop in international adoptions accounting for more than half of the decrease.
- The amount of foster care adoptions has remained stable at about 50,000 for the five years through 2014.

The church, not just the government, plays an important part in foster care and adoption, Medefind told BP.

"Government has a vital justice role to play in protecting children from harm," he said. "But what children need to thrive is love and nurture and belonging, and that can only happen one caring family at a time. The church cannot outsource James 1:27 to the government."

James 1:27, a verse often cited by Christian adoption advocates, says, "Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Tom Strobe is Washington bureau chief for Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist Convention's news service. BP reports on missions, ministry and witness advanced through the Cooperative Program and on... [Expand Bio]

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