

2018 Foster Youth Internship Program®



FOSTER YOUTH
INTERNSHIP PROGRAM®

TOOLS FOR TRANSFORMATION

Building a Compassionate
Child Welfare System



Recommendations from
Foster Care Alumni



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About CCAI



HISTORY

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) is a nonprofit, bipartisan organization that works to raise awareness about the needs of children without families and to remove policy barriers that hinder them from knowing the love and support a family provides. CCAI is unique in that each of our programs brings together policymakers and individuals with direct foster care or adoption experience. We have found that when policymakers hear direct experiences of those affected by child welfare policy, they become engaged in this issue and work to bring about legislative improvements in an effort to ensure each child has their right to a family realized. CCAI was founded in 2001 by advocates of the world's orphaned and foster youth. In founding CCAI, these advocates sought to match the commitment of members of Congress' Adoption Caucus, the Congressional Coalition on Adoption, with the information and resources needed to make the dream of a family a reality for every child.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to raising awareness about the millions of children around the world in need of permanent, safe, and loving homes and to eliminating the barriers that hinder them from realizing their basic right to a family.

Executive Director Foreword

It is my great pleasure to introduce you to the ten authors of this policy report. Brittney, Calli, Shay, Courtney, Noor, Amber, Ixchel, Alison, Terrence and Jordan have worked diligently — throughout an incredibly rigorous summer congressional internship program — to research and write about federal child welfare policy and present the results of their analysis here.

Each year, CCAI's Foster Youth Interns take on this important task to ensure the more than 437,000 children currently in foster care across the nation face less obstacles than they themselves did, and instead experience improved life outcomes. By combining their experiences in foster care with their own creative solutions to barriers in U.S. child welfare policy, these extraordinary young professionals hope to inspire federal policymakers and advocates to make positive changes in laws, policies and regulations.

The Board of Directors and staff at the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) are extremely proud of each of these authors. Each embraced the tension of reflecting on past challenges in order to offer recommendations for champions in Congress, the Administration and the private sector to consider and incorporate when crafting improvements to current child welfare policy and practice.

Now in its 16th year, the Foster Youth Internship Program® boasts over 200 alumni currently serving in leadership positions in child welfare, business, government and philanthropy across the nation. Clearly CCAI's Foster Youth Interns go on to have an impact beyond the United States Congress and their summer presence in congressional offices and on committees of jurisdiction over foster care.

This year, CCAI would like to express our gratitude to Mary Bissell and Rebecca Robuck of ChildFocus. We were very proud to partner with them in the Foster Youth Interns' report writing process this summer. Their expertise in child welfare policy and leadership in the report writing process was incredible, and this report is in its final state because of their guidance and editing.

Finally, I want to sincerely thank those who invested in CCAI's mission and these inspiring young leaders. A program of the magnitude of CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program® would simply not be possible without significant investment of time, talent and treasure in each of our ten interns. From our Board of Directors and Advisory Council, to our volunteer report advisors and selection committee, to CCAI's partners and sponsors – we are extremely grateful for the robust support the CCAI staff and Foster Youth Interns receive to make this program successful year after year, and so I invite you to take a moment to read our Acknowledgements and Partners pages at the end of this report.

It is now my honor to introduce the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute's 2018 Foster Youth Internship Program® Report, *Tools for Transformation: Building a Compassionate Child Welfare System*.



Becky Weichhand
Executive Director

About the Program



The Foster Youth Internship Program® is a signature program of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute.

CCAI's Foster Youth Internship Program® is a highly esteemed congressional internship for young adults who spent their formative years in the U.S. foster care system. The FYI Program began in 2003 as an effort to raise awareness to federal policymakers about the needs and unique perspectives of those who spent time in foster care. As part of the program, CCAI organizes retreats, advocacy trainings and various networking opportunities with experts in the child welfare field. Interns participating in this program benefit both personally and professionally, gaining experience and skills that will bolster their careers for years to come and developing the foundation to be lifelong advocates for improving the foster care system.

CCAI's Foster Youth Internship (FYI) Program® offers the creative and talented FYI Program interns the opportunity to use their newfound understanding of Capitol Hill and federal policy to research and write a policy report throughout the summer. As a result of the FYI Program, federal policymakers are shown firsthand the experiences of youth in foster care, and use their new knowledge to inspire legislative change. The interns focus on subjects they are personally passionate about due to their experiences and understanding after living in foster care and make personal recommendations for improving the U.S. foster care system. This report is published annually and presented at both congressional and White House briefings. The opinions expressed in the Foster Youth Internship Program® Report are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the view of CCAI.

Paving the Way to Sibling Connections

Brittney Barros

Executive Summary

Research reveals that as many as 75% of foster children are placed apart from one or more of their siblings (Kernan, n.d.). That means only one in four foster youth will ever be placed with their brothers and sisters. Children separated from their siblings while in care are more likely to develop emotional attachment disorders, feelings of isolation, and have an increased risk of self-harm. Foster youth inevitably experience grief from placement instability, abuse and neglect, and being taken away from their parents. Separating siblings adds to the multi-faceted beast of trauma that is ultimately preventable. It is critical that Congress hold states accountable by examining both sibling separation among foster youth and the barriers that states have identified that prevent keeping siblings together. Sibling separation in care should be addressed by passing a National Sibling Bill of Rights, creating federal incentives for states to place siblings together, and requiring the federal government to collect key data from the states.

Personal Reflection

Throughout our experience in foster care, my siblings Brandon (18), Scott (17), Serenity (14) and I did not see each other or live together for six years. Caseworkers would prevent my siblings and me from connecting with each other by claiming that “we were not ready” or “would not be able to handle” contact. They were wrong. In and out of foster care, the most traumatizing aspect of the child welfare system was being separated from my siblings. Because of the pain of separation, my brother attempted suicide and inflicted self-harm. My sister often has crying spells about my brother’s current situation. I was diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I often experience nightmares about never seeing my siblings again and suffer from a tremendous amount of grief and loss. To this day, it breaks my heart that we are no longer together despite our strong sibling bond that we cherish deeply. They are my soulmates, and I hated the system for ripping me away from the people I love the most. My siblings and I felt isolated, especially when we saw other sibling groups who had the privilege of living together, never having experienced the child welfare system.

Sibling bonds are truly one of a kind. They entail some of the darkest secrets and impeccable loving memories, share valuable life lessons, and are the longest-lasting relationships of a lifetime. Siblings bleed the same blood together, cry the same tears together, and fulfill life’s destiny together. They are each other’s best friends, shoulders to cry on, and truly shape life’s adversities and achievements. Foster youth deserve this one of a kind bond which should not be taken by a broken system.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

It is critical that Congress ensure that siblings have a right to stay together whenever possible, reduce the top three state-identified barriers to placing siblings together, and hold states accountable for increasing joint placement through federally-required data collection on sibling separation. More specifically, Congress should:

- Create and pass a National Sibling Bill of Rights, based off of state legislative models, that provides specific guidance on keeping siblings together.
- Authorize the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) to establish a competitive grant program to encourage state child welfare agencies to develop specialized foster care programs designed specifically for sibling groups with a large number, a wide age range, and complex needs.
- Urge HHS to release, without delay, the December 2016 Final Rule on the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) which contains critical data elements related to sibling placement and separation.

The Problem and Current Law

Sibling separation within foster care is a significant issue because of the damaging impact it has on foster youth. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013), children separated from their siblings while in care are more likely to develop emotional attachment disorders, feelings of isolation, and have an increased risk of self-harm. In contrast, sibling connection is associated with fewer behavioral problems and an increase in self-compassion. Joint placement of siblings is also correlated with a greater likelihood of family reunification (Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw, & Brookhart, 2005). Despite the findings in these studies, there is currently not a national Sibling Bill of Rights enacted at the federal level. However, ten states (Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Oregon, Nevada, Minnesota, and North Carolina) have already created and implemented a Sibling Bill of Rights which guarantees foster youth the rights to frequent visitation, to live together, and to be told why a sibling was placed at a different location (Green, 2018). In the other 40 states, foster youth do not have those rights, which are critical for siblings in care because they are correlated to fewer psychosocial problems and behavioral issues as well as an increase in family reunification.

According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), there are three major barriers that states face in placing siblings together. Figure 1 reveals that every state has reported difficulties in identifying available placements for larger sibling groups. As a challenge to keeping siblings together, only two states have reported no difficulties in placing siblings with exceptional needs together while 44 states have reported major or minor challenges in placing siblings with a wide age range together.

Challenges reported by states in a nationwide survey

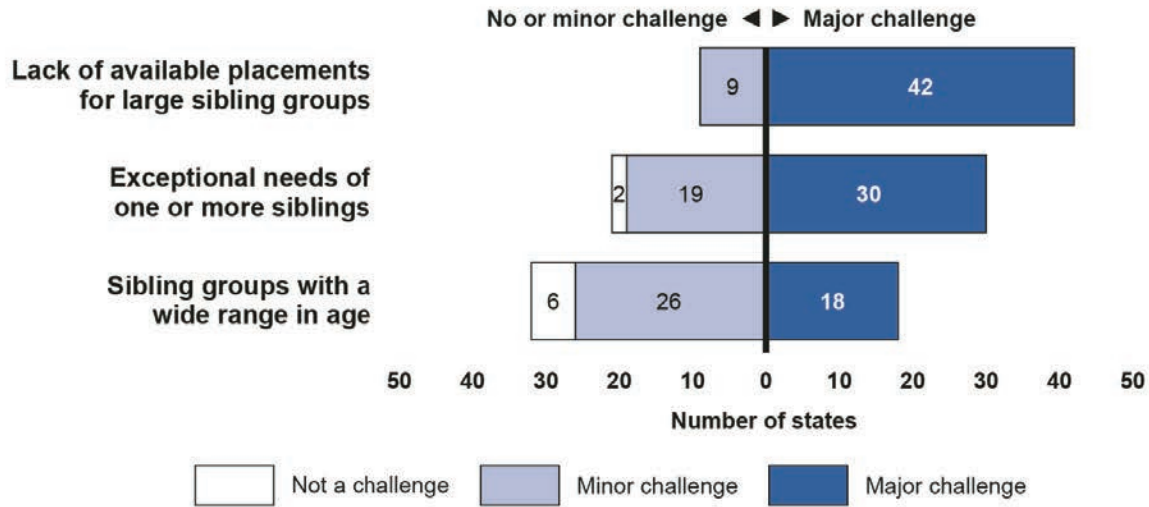


Figure 1. Top three major challenges to placing siblings together that were identified by the GAO. Figure retrieved from GAO, 2012.

Some states already have exemplary model programs designed to keep sibling groups together, such as the Neighbor to Family Program (NTF) in Florida. This is an accredited, evidenced-based foster care program designed to keep siblings together by employing professionals from the children's communities who are willing to work with whole sibling groups (Rast, 2012). As research shows, "children who are kept with their siblings are spared lasting effects that are caused by the incredible pain and loss separation inflicts on children already traumatized by abuse and neglect" (Rast, 2012, p. 4). Figure 2 (see below) reveals that 98.6% of siblings in the NTF program were kept together whereas only 50.9% of siblings were kept together in a regular foster care program. This model effectively addresses sibling separation among sibling groups with a large number, a wide age range, and complex needs.

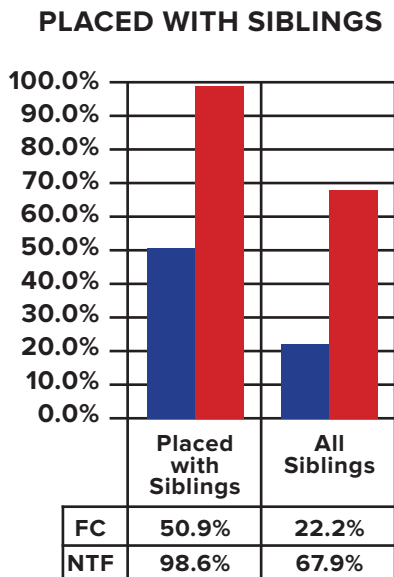


Figure 2. The percentage of siblings placed together compared from the NTF program and a regular foster care program. Figure retrieved from Rast, 2012.

While the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 emphasizes that "reasonable efforts shall be made to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, kinship guardianship, or adoptive placement" (§ 206), child welfare agencies are not being held accountable for failing to follow through. In December 2016, AFCARS (the required data collection mechanism for case information gathering within foster care) revised its requirements to include a state-by-state count on sibling placement and separation.

However, HHS is withholding implementation of the newly revised data requirements because of “expressed concerns with the burden of modifying state data systems to collect and report new and additional data elements” (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2016). Without this data, it is difficult for the federal government to hold states accountable for performing poorly in keeping siblings together.

Policy Recommendations

- **Create and pass a National Sibling Bill of Rights, based off of state legislative models, that provides specific guidance on keeping siblings together.** In order to break down systematic barriers, Congress needs to create and pass a National Sibling Bill of Rights. States have adopted a model Sibling Bill of Rights so that foster youth have the opportunity to stay connected to their siblings. Federal law should provide the same protections for children in all states.
- **Authorize the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) to establish a competitive grant program to encourage state child welfare agencies to develop specialized foster care programs designed specifically for sibling groups with a large number, a wide age range, and complex needs.** In order to make it easier for states to place siblings together, the federal government should incentivize child welfare agencies to offer and develop specialized foster care programs designed specifically to address a range of sibling needs. These programs should be evidence-based and proven to substantially increase joint sibling placements.
- **Urge HHS to release, without delay, the December 2016 Final Rule on the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) which contains critical data elements related to sibling placement and separation.** Congress should urge HHS to release and implement the newly required AFCARS data on sibling separation. If the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) and policymakers implement this Final Rule, siblings across the country will have one less traumatic experience to worry about: being torn away from the people closest to them.

Building a Bridge to Adulthood: Supporting Foster Parents So Youth Can Thrive

Calli Crowder

Executive Summary

Foster parents play a major role in creating a strong bridge to help youth cross over into a safe and reliable adulthood, but child welfare agencies do not always give foster families the support and training they need to provide young people with all the normal activities and opportunities their peers have. These include participating in social events and school activities, obtaining a driver's license and learning basic financial and other life skills. States also lack important information on who and where their foster families are, what needs they have, and how they could be better served and matched with foster youth. As a result, child welfare agencies do not have the data they really need to improve foster parent trainings, expand the availability of important supports and encourage foster parents to continue as foster parents even when things get difficult. Finally, foster parents often struggle to give the children in their care a normal childhood because current foster care payments are simply not enough to pay for additional expenses for sports, arts and music, school trips and other opportunities that lead to healthy development and a sense of belonging. Congress can and must do more to support foster parents so they can help foster youth become stable, successful and healthy adults.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Congress should authorize funds to direct the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to provide state child welfare agencies with technical assistance to help them maximize enhanced federal IV-E training dollars to expand and improve foster parent training.
- Congress should authorize HHS to establish a new National Foster and Adoptive Parents Database (NFAPD) that requires state child welfare agencies to collect and submit key data on foster parents, relative caregivers and adoptive families.
- Establish a new pool of federal funding that allows states to reimburse foster families for the additional costs of critical youth development and enrichment activities that enhance normalcy, stability and a successful transition into adulthood.

Personal Reflection

Bridges create a path when no other way is possible. The foster care system provided a suspension bridge that supported me and gave me direction but was also heavy and complex in its design. Building a strong suspension bridge requires five main components: main cables, tower, piers, deck, and most important, the anchorages that provide support and connection. In the foster care system, the anchorages are the foster parents who help determine whether youth will merely survive or grow-up to thrive in society. In my experience, foster care often puts barriers in the way of a normal childhood, and young people in foster care do not always have the same liberties and opportunities as other typical American youth. With the support

of a great foster family, however, foster youth can overcome these challenges. Foster parents play a critical role in a youth's ability and desire to succeed in the foster care system and beyond, and they should be fully supported, resourced, and empowered.

As a young person in foster care, I crossed the bridge of success with my foster parents' support. But in the sea of confusion that is foster care, I learned quickly that I was anything but normal. It was often difficult for my siblings and me to do the things that other young people do. I remember when my sisters and I asked my foster parents to stay over at a friend's house, attend a party or participate in other high school events, foster care rules often prevented them from letting us go. If we wanted to stay over at a friend's house, our friend's parents would have to go through a background check, home study and walk through. When our church or school had overnights, we could not go. All the rules restricting us were really difficult because normalcy -- the ability for foster youth to participate in the same activities and opportunities as their peers -- had a significant impact on our future well-being. Foster youth should not be treated differently just because they were dealt a different hand in life. They should also have an equal right to enjoy a life of opportunity, stability and fun.

Despite burdensome foster care rules, my foster parents figured out ways for us to have the normal experiences that contributed to our success, even when it cost them time and money. Despite the challenges, they worked hard to make sure I got my driver's license at the age of 18, was able to go on my 8th grade school trip to Washington, DC, went with them on vacations and stayed actively involved in school extra-curricular activities and church functions. The biggest blessing was that all four of my siblings and I stayed together in the same foster home for six years, an uncommon situation for most children in foster care. Staying with one family in one place created both normalcy and stability: two factors that can make all the difference in becoming the next negative statistic or being successful.

My foster parents helped bridge gaps in my transition to adulthood that the system was unable to address on its own. They taught me how to drive in the same way they taught their own kids and allowed me to drive their vehicles so I did not have to buy insurance or spend money on driving classes that were not covered by foster care. Because of their support, I got my driver's license while in care which opened up a whole new world of access to friends, activities and jobs. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many foster youth. Research shows that the majority of youth in foster care have not obtained their driver's license so that they can participate in the same activities and employment opportunities as their peers. One recent study, for example, found that only 24% of youth living independently reported having a driver's license compared to 75% of youth in the general population (Thompson, Wojciak, & Cooly, 2018, p. 21). Teaching me to drive is just one of the many things my foster parents did for me. Their support is the reason I have a college degree, can manage my finances and know that nothing is impossible.

At 25, I am a success. I have a bachelor's degree, have worked in a law firm, exercise my right to vote, and maintain a credit score of over 700. If it were not for my foster parents, I would be susceptible to the risk of becoming a negative statistic of the child welfare system. Their influence has allowed me to evolve into an engaged citizen and a contributing member of my community. Congress should make sure that all foster parents have the supports to help their children the way my foster parents helped me.

The Problem

For the youth in their care to succeed, foster parents must be able to access the full range of information, support and training they need to focus on what is truly important: being foster parents. The reality, however, is that many foster parents are not getting the assistance they need. As Senator Chuck Grassley, Co-Chair of Senate Caucus on Foster Youth, explains “between 30 and 50 percent of licensed foster parents choose to stop being foster parents after only one year.” (Grassley, 2018). According to experts, the three primary reasons foster parents quit are unrealistic expectations about what caregiving will entail, the lack of support and services, and insufficient training (Williams, 2018). A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) study also found that more than 29 states reported inadequate support for foster families, including their difficulties in contacting child welfare agency caseworkers with an additional 31 states reporting limited access to adequate services such as child care (GAO, 2018).

Foster care agencies must also do more to ensure that foster parents are adequately trained before placing a youth in their care, understand how children’s experiences and trauma might affect their behavior and needs, and match young people with foster parents who are well-equipped for their new responsibilities. In addition, child welfare agencies do not often possess data needed to track those licensed foster families that are available in a given area, understand their needs and talents, match families more appropriately with individual children, and identify what specified trainings and programs are available and which are lacking. To strengthen support for foster parents, this policy paper focuses on three issues: requiring states to provide the full range of adequate training to help a youth experience a normal childhood and become a healthy and successful adult; directing states to collect and report data on how foster parents are being supported so they can supply the right services and fill gaps; and providing federal funds to reimburse foster parents when they cover the costs of additional activities and opportunities that support healthy youth development.

While state child welfare agencies provide basic foster care payments to cover the costs of feeding and housing a child, these benefits are often insufficient to cover other important expenses that give young people the normal experiences that help them prepare for adulthood. The foster parents who go above and beyond to cover these extra costs should not have to dip into their own resources to make these opportunities possible. And for those families that do not have any income to spare, many foster children have to go without the chance to learn how to drive a car, figure out how to manage their money, buy insurance, and cover the costs of trips and extra-curricular activities like sports, music and art. Child welfare agencies should be able to use federal funding to cover some of the additional costs foster parents need to help their children grow and develop just as other parents support their children.

It is also difficult to make sure foster parents are getting the supports and training they need if there is no way for states to collect and report on basic information about them. Currently, there are ways to track outcomes for youth in foster care through federal reporting systems such as The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), but there is no national database or system that tracks the states’ provision of support, training, outcomes for foster families (Children’s Bureau, 2017). While laws such as the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 assists adolescents aging out of foster care, it does not ensure

that their foster parents have the training and support they need to help their children with life transitions. One way to support foster families better is to provide funding to child welfare agencies to conduct a detailed census of foster parents “to better utilize information about active, licensed parents” (Children Need Amazing Parents [CHAMPS], 2017). An annual census would allow child welfare agencies to track how foster parents are meeting the needs of their children, what age group they most connect with, what resources are available to them and which young people are best matched with which foster parents.

Current Law

The Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 expanded the availability of federal training dollars through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. This enabled states to use funds to train those who are caring for and working directly with children in foster care, including relative guardians, the staff of private child welfare agencies, court personnel, attorneys, guardians ad litem, court-appointed special advocates, kinship caregivers and foster parents. These provisions are intended to help incentivize the states to be more thoughtful and creative about how they provide and design trainings, including making them more culturally relevant and trauma-informed to better meet the needs of today’s youth. This funding should also incentivize states to develop new ways to deliver foster parent trainings, including online access for easier participation. This is especially important in rural areas where foster parents sometimes find it difficult to travel inner city to where the main trainings are taking place, costing extra time and finances.

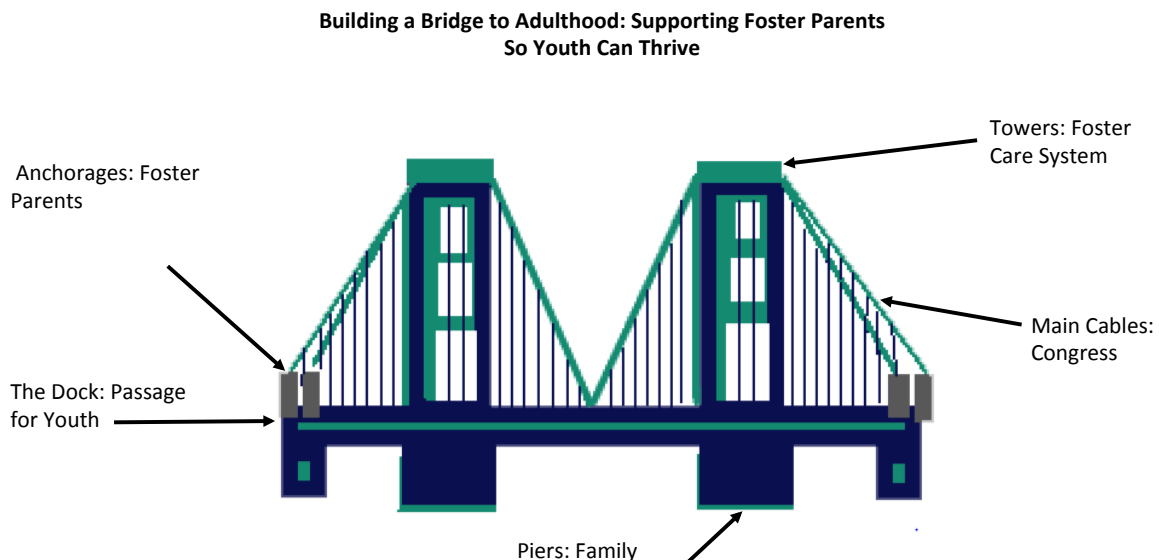
Despite this important source of funding, many states still do not have the experience and support they need to take full advantage of the money. Congress could change this by requiring HHS to provide technical assistance to help states develop new training to address children’s developmental needs in a trauma-informed way, specific child development issues and more effective ways to make sure foster parent and youth voices are heard. The trainings can also be used to find out more about what foster parents need, the areas in which they feel most unsupported, what kind of expectations foster parents have before they are licensed to care for a child and how to make them feel like partners with the agency. Training that integrates foster parents’ recommendations will help ensure that they are more qualified and confident in meeting the needs of foster youth and walk into their caregiving roles with realistic expectations and solid tools to focus on what is most important: the young people who become part of their families.

Policy Recommendations

- **Congress should authorize funds to direct the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to provide state child welfare agencies with technical assistance to help them maximize enhanced federal IV-E training dollars to expand and improve foster parent training.** The Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008 expanded the availability of federal Title IV-E training dollars to cover not just the training of staff in public child welfare agencies, but also court personnel, attorneys, guardians ad litem and relative guardians, adoptive parents and foster parents. Congress should allocate additional funds to allow HHS to provide technical assistance to the states to improve online and in-person training opportunities to help foster parents learn new ways to support youth development, such as driver’s training, financial literacy, and access to health care opportunities.

Technical assistance can lead to better and more accessible training that will allow foster parents to understand what youth need, gain access to available programs and be more effective in caring for their foster children.

- **Congress should authorize HHS to establish a new National Foster and Adoptive Parents Database (NFAPD) that requires state child welfare agencies to collect and submit key data on foster parents, relative caregivers and adoptive families.** The federal government now tracks extensive data on the needs of children in foster care, but knows little about the needs of the foster parents who bridge their transitions into adulthood. As a condition of federal IV-E foster care funds, states should be required to provide the new National Foster and Adoptive Parents Database (NFAPD) with information on available foster parent supports and trainings, the overall number and characteristics of current foster care homes, the number of children placed in foster family homes, the number of years foster families have taken in children, and the number of families annually that choose to leave the system. This database will help the federal and state government identify trends, better understand what supports are working and identify important gaps in recruitment and retention.
- **Establish a new pool of federal funding that allows states to reimburse foster families for the additional costs of critical youth development and enrichment activities that enhance normalcy, stability and a successful transition into adulthood.** Monthly foster care stipends are often insufficient in covering the costs of providing basic shelter, food and clothes to young people in foster care. But there are also additional expenses that are key to children's well-being such as the opportunity to play sports, participate in the performing arts, go on school trips and to prom, buy supplies for school projects, driver's training and other necessities. A modest amount of federal funding allocated to states based on the number of children in foster care would allow states to reimburse foster parents when they pay for normal adolescent activities.



Policy Report No. 3

One Home, One School: Investing in Placement and Educational Stability for Foster Youth

Shay House

Executive Summary

Many young people in the child welfare system experience both placement and educational instability. These frequent moves are detrimental to their development, increase the risk of behavioral problems, and can be a barrier to reunification or permanency. The lack of permanence foster youth experience inside and outside of the classroom is problematic because it shapes the trajectory of their lives. Frequently, when foster youth change home placements, they also switch schools, thus falling behind academically and losing any potential social or academic supports they established before their placement change. The instability foster youth experience becomes a vicious cycle: placement changes lead to behavioral problems which lead to more placement changes, often because foster parents are not equipped to deal with the behavioral problems foster youth display.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

Congress can help to improve placement stability and, in turn, ensure better outcomes for young people in foster care by establishing a federal demonstration grant to test and evaluate innovative approaches to placement stability, including:

- Testing targeted community-based recruitment to preserve children's community connections;
- Ensuring training that equips foster parents with the necessary skill set to effectively serve this demographic of youth; and
- Creating peer support networks for foster parents.

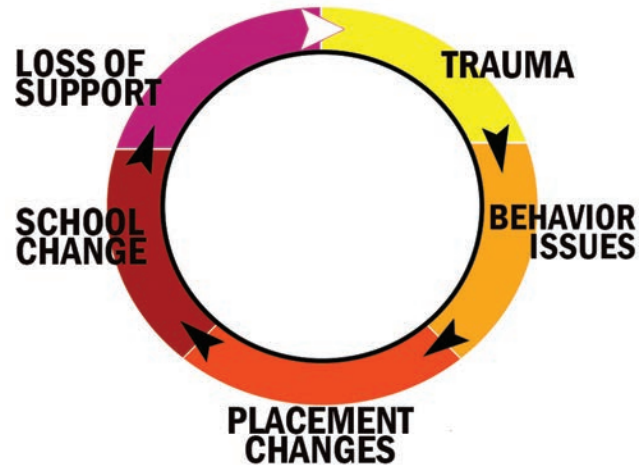
Personal Reflection

Throughout my time in the Alameda County foster care system, I experienced instability in both my foster homes and my schooling. Unfortunately, I felt victim to child welfare system mishaps and missed out on what should be a given: having one stable home and caregiver. I have been in roughly 45 foster homes, eight group homes, and 23 schools. I felt like I was being lugged around like unwanted trash, likely to be thrown out at any given moment as a result of moving from house to house. The relentless upheaval did not stop in the foster homes. I not only had to deal with the uncertainty at home, but I also had to deal with the anguish of the unknown at a new school with every move. Typically, moving houses meant moving schools. The reason a placement change often equated into a school change was due to the limited amount of housing available in that particular community. Hence, customarily I was placed in a house outside of my prior school

district. Even if I were allowed to stay in the same school it would have been difficult due to the 90 minute commute from my new placement to my old school. I recall there was a time in my life where I would move placements every three months which resulted in me attending seven different schools in one academic year. This left me both emotionally exhausted and academically behind. I not only struggled to develop relationships with my peers and teachers but also had difficulties with staying current with my classwork.

The Problem

Addressing the frequency of placement and school changes is imperative to confronting disparate outcomes for youth in the child welfare system. Research suggests the educational disparity between foster youth and the general student population is due to this educational instability that foster youth experience as a result of multiple placement changes (Heimpel, 2018). More specifically, foster youth “lose four and six months of academic progress per move” due to a variety of factors such as fluctuation in curriculum from school to school (Lahey, 2014). For many youth in foster care, school provides their only sense of normalcy. When they are shuffled from one placement to the next they lose much-needed stability and consistency (Chambers & Palmer, 2011). Frequent placement changes also make it extremely difficult for youth to stay on top of their schoolwork, which is a big reason for low high school graduation rates among foster youth. More often than not, higher education is the sole determinant of later success in life: according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, individuals who have obtained a bachelor degree have an income of over twice the number of individuals who have not graduated from high school (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Currently, only 10% of former foster youth attend college, and only 3% graduate (Airaksinen, 2017).



Foster youth experience placement instability, frequently resulting in educational instability, in part due to the trauma they experience outside of the classroom. Research conducted by Minnesota School of Social Work suggests the “[...]hypothalamic-pituitary adrenal (HPA) axis activity are higher in foster youth than the general population” (Pecora, 2010, p. 4). The HPA is “involved in responses related to physical and psychological stressors” (Pecora, 2010, p. 4). This study showed a correlation between disruption in placement and an increase in HPA activity (Pecora, 2010, p. 4). The number of placement changes foster youth experience alters aspects of their brain, which contributes to some of the behavioral problems children in foster care may exhibit. This becomes a vicious cycle: placement changes lead to behavioral problems, which lead to more placement changes because many foster parents are not equipped to deal with the behavioral problems foster youth display.

As a result of inadequate training and preparation, foster parents often give up on youth with undesirable behavior. According to research, “half or more of all foster parents quit within a year or after they finish caring for their first child” (CHAMPS, 2017, p. 3). A separate study found that “high school students who changed schools even once were less than half as likely to graduate as those who did not experience a change in schools” (Pecora, 2010, p. 4). This illustrates how detrimental a single change in school placement can be. The more placement changes a youth experiences, the more likely they are to experience multiple school placements (Pecora, 2010, p. 4). This cycle can be disrupted by equipping foster parents with the skills they need to provide foster youth with a long-term caring and nurturing familial environment.

Current Law

Currently, there are two prevailing laws that impact the education of children in foster care. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (P.L. 114-95) (also known as “ESSA”) and the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* (P.L. 110-351) (“Fostering Connections”) address the instability foster youth experience within the K-12 system. Fostering Connections created new requirements for the foster care system, such as mandating that child welfare agencies develop a plan for school stability, including ensuring transportation, when they determined that attending the school of origin was in the child’s best interest. ESSA, which focused on the educational system, contained provisions to ensure that foster youth can remain in the same school regardless of residency requirements. It also required Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to partner with child-welfare agencies to ensure school stability.

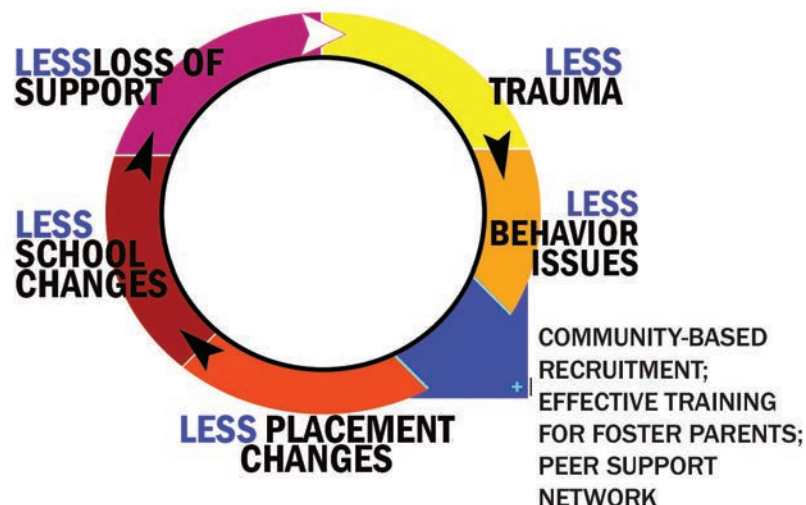
Although these laws appear to address educational instability among foster youth, they fail to address the root of the problem, which is placement instability. Currently, Fostering Connections and ESSA only helps when a placement change has already occurred, which is insufficient in addressing foster youth educational instability.

Policy Recommendations

Create a federal demonstration project to test innovative approaches to placement and educational stability. To make meaningful progress on this issue, Congress should create a federal demonstration grant to encourage states to test innovative solutions to improve both placement and educational stability among young people in foster care. The federal demonstration grant should include funding to help states:

- **Test targeted community-based recruitment to preserve children’s community connections.** States would identify communities with a dense population of foster youth to actively meet their housing needs within those communities. The goal of targeting community-focused recruitment is to ensure placement changes can occur within a school district. This would eliminate the school change which often happens as a result of foster youth moving outside of their school district due to lack of local placements. In California, 1 in 5 foster youth are placed outside of their county of origin, making school continuity difficult or even impossible (Loudenback, 2015). It is likely that foster youth will continue to experience educational instability until we address the root of the problem: placement instability. That is why I am urging members of Congress to implement legislation that works to preserve placements within these communities.

- Ensure training that equips foster parents with the necessary skill set to effectively serve this demographic of youth.** Research has identified a number of effective strategies for caring for children who have been exposed to trauma. One of the solutions is more effectively preparing foster parents. Children Need Amazing Parents (CHAMPS), a national policy campaign that promotes high-quality parenting for foster youth, states: “Quality parenting improves stability and permanency for children” (CHAMPS, 2017, p.3). Placement stability is one of the key determinants of a foster youth’s educational stability, which predicts future educational success. When a foster youth experiences instability outside of the classroom their chances for academic success decrease significantly (Pecora, 2010). Hence, I urge Congress to fund evidence-based training in order to provide foster youth with qualified foster parents to ensure the first placement is the best placement which will lead to less placement instability (CHAMPS, 2017, p. 14).
- Implement a peer support network for foster parents/youth similar to the Mockingbird model approach.** The purpose of the Mockingbird approach is to provide a support network for foster parents/youth in the same community. It is imperative this peer support group take into account the feedback from all parties involved but more specifically foster youth and parents. This would allow the people who are personally impacted by this program to have a voice to address issues. The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) provides a “micro-community of social support among the foster families” which has been found to help placement stability (Northwest Institute for Children and Families, 2007, p. 111). Research shows, 84% of foster youth remained in one foster home during the implementation period of MFM (Northwest Institute for Children and Families, 2007). In addition, when a placement change was necessary through the MFM children were able to move to another home within the MFM network of foster families (Northwest Institute for Children and Families, 2007). This allowed the child to remain in the same school since the proximity of the new placement was still within the boundaries of the school district. It is evident the MFM increases foster youth placement stability which is why I am urging Congress to employ a federal demonstration grant for a peer support network for foster parents/youth.



Policy Report No. 4

Ensuring Children's Well-Being by Supporting Kinship Caregivers

Cortney Jones

Executive Summary

Based on my personal experience as a youth in kinship care and now as a kinship care provider, I know first-hand the many challenges that kinship families face. The reality is that, while the goal of foster care is to keep families together, the nation's child welfare system was never designed with kinship care in mind. There should be a paradigm shift to create policies and an infrastructure that put families first. Congress has attempted to expand the supports available to the millions of kinship caregivers, but often these reforms are only optional to the states and have rarely been sustained over time. Additional supports are needed to ensure the long-term permanency and overall well-being of children, youth and families. It is important that Congress allow states more flexibility in using federal funds to support and meet the unique needs of each family. In addition, kinship families should be fully informed, not just of their legal options, but of the child's history and needs and those services available through the child welfare system and in their local communities. Finally, kinship caregivers should have access to the same legal representation as other parents and children involved in the child welfare system so they can make informed decisions. With the right supports, kinship care families can continue growing together, supporting each other, and staying together.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Congress should allow states to use Title IV-E foster care dollars to fund kinship care services and supports.
- States must include in their Title IV-E plan details on how they will ensure that all kinship families are made aware of the full range of options and services available through the child welfare agency and in the community.
- Congress should expand and add additional funding to the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) of the Older Americans Act to ensure that kinship caregivers have access to legal representation.

Personal Reflection

My mom made a courageous and selfless decision to ask for help. At the age of two, I moved to Texas to stay with my grandmother in an informal kinship setting (one in which child welfare was not involved). I entered into the child welfare system at the age of eight years old. After four years in the foster care, I was reunified with my grandmother in a formal kinship setting (one that was overseen by Child Protective Services [CPS]). Because she did not have enough support to care for me, my grandmother made the hard decision to place me back in the foster care system. The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) could have been very instrumental in my life as an adolescent. As a result of not having the services and supports of FFPSA to help my family succeed, I spent ten years in the foster care system and aged out when I was eighteen years old.

As an adult, I became a potential kinship caregiver. After learning that my cousin had two kids placed in the foster care system, I offered to help. I met my cousin for the first time at her dependency court hearing and ultimately was recommended as a formal kinship placement option by the court. Although I reached out to the child welfare agency several times for support and resources to prepare for the arrival of my cousin's two children, the agency provided very little support. Specifically, there was a lack of communication about my options as a kinship provider. Unsure as to whether I would receive the support I needed, I decided to take an alternate route and became a licensed foster-to-adopt parent. Becoming a licensed foster parent instead of a kinship care provider ensured that I received the assistance I needed to be able to care for the children successfully. As a licensed foster parent, I received a monthly stipend, child care, and medical coverage for the kids. I also had several people check in with us on a monthly basis to see how the kids were doing and to see if we needed anything. It would not have been my first choice to become a licensed foster parent instead of a kinship provider, but none of these supports would have been possible if I had not done so.

The Problem

More than 2.7 million children are being raised by relatives or “kinship caregivers” in the United States (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). Many times, relatives step in and help out because the child's parents are dealing with substance abuse, incarceration, domestic violence, unemployment, divorce, and illness and/or death to avoid involvement with the child welfare system – this is referred to as informal kinship care. Approximately 104,000 children are in formal kinship placements, which means that the placement is arranged by the child welfare system under the state-supervised foster care (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012).

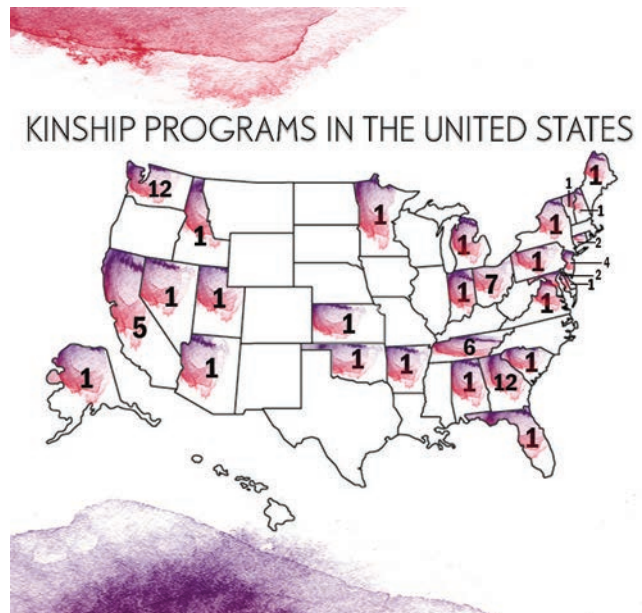
Our current foster care system was not designed with kinship caregivers in mind. When it was first created, the child welfare system favored placements with non-relative foster families who had no previous relationship with the child and failed to consider the systemic needs of kin. As a result, child welfare systems failed to develop the policies, services and overall infrastructure needed to support kinship caregivers. Despite progress, kinship caregivers encounter a range of obstacles including the additional cost of caring for the child, the endless search for resources, the fight to keep a family together, attention to their own health needs, and the opportunity to plan for a future for their child. These needs are often exacerbated by child welfare agencies' lack

of funding and infrastructure to support these families. In addition, caregivers are asked to make important legal decisions that affect the child without understanding their full range of options. When they do not understand the implications of their decisions, children often return to foster care which perpetuates the trauma they have experienced. In addition, caregivers are the only parties to a child welfare case who do not have legal representation, which hinders families from making informed decisions.

To help with these many hurdles, Kinship Navigator Programs (KNP) have been developed around the country. Meanwhile only 29 states have implemented a formal program to provide support and services to children in need.

There are several benefits to placing children with families instead of in traditional foster care. Importantly, children are able to maintain a sense of stability through community bonds and belonging through family connection. Many families are also able to help the child maintain their racial and ethnic heritage. Being separated from a parent can be traumatic, and statistics show being placed with family can minimize the trauma and loss of the separation. Overall, kinship care increases child safety, stability, permanence, and well-being (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012).

Figure 1. This map shows the 71 kinship programs within the United States. Data retrieved from Grandfamilies.org, 2018.



Current Law

The federal government has only recently acknowledged the importance of kinship caregivers, and the need to support kin who are caring for children in the child welfare system.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351), passed in 2008, was one of the most significant federal laws to support kinship care. It provides funding to support Kinship Navigator Programs, which link relative caregivers to services and supports in their community. There are two main pillars to the kinship navigator program. One is to educate kinship caregivers on programs and services that will help enhance the lives of the children they are raising. The second is to seek public and private partnership to ensure kinship caregivers have access to relevant services. The law also requires states to notify relatives when children from their family entered the foster care system so that grandparents and other relatives are always considered as a first placement option. Finally, the law allows states the option to use Guardianship Assistance programs (GAP) dollars to assist children while in the care of relative. This allows children to exit foster with kinship as a permanent placement.

In 2014, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113-183) includes provisions extending the Family Connections Grants, which allow states to establish or expand Kinship Navigator programs. Although this funding was eliminated for a few years, the FY2018 Omnibus spending bill provided additional funds to help states establish or expand their kinship navigator programs.

Finally, in 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act allowed, for the first time, states to provide prevention services to children and youth “at risk” of entering the foster care system, and these services can be provided in the home of a kinship caregiver (Generations United, 2018). The law also allows states to have the opportunity to receive federal reimbursement up to 50% for an evidence-based kinship navigator program.

Federal Policy Highlights

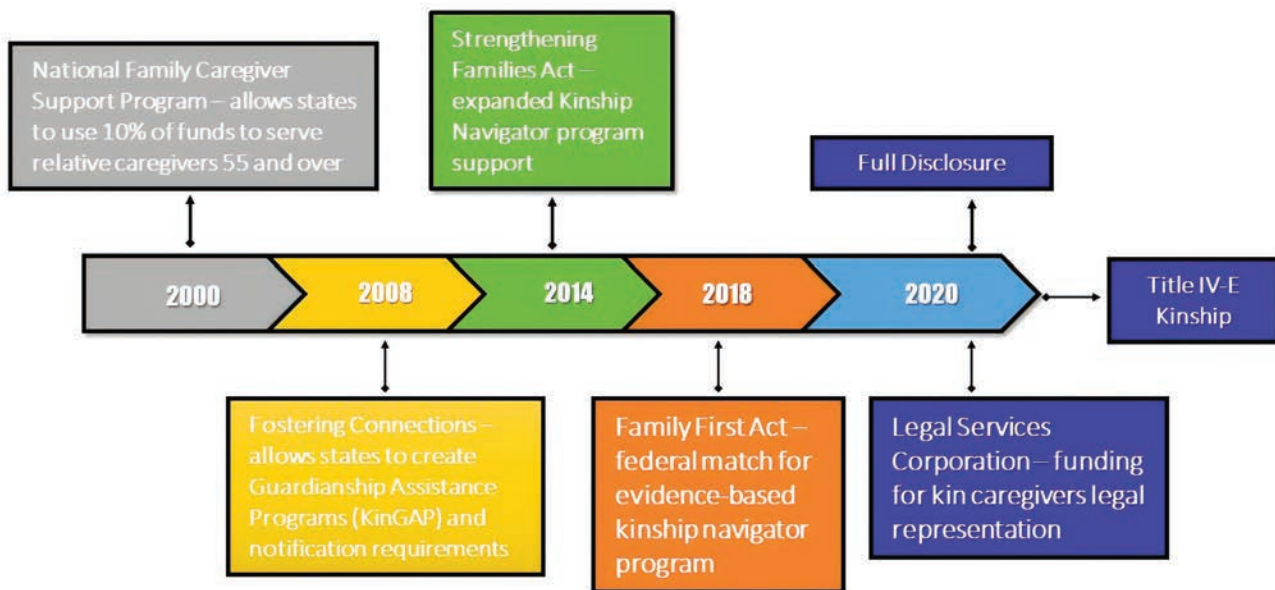


Figure 2. Federal policy highlights related to kinship caregiver support. Including policy recommendations for year 2020.

Policy Recommendations

With all of these policy reforms, Congress took important steps forward to support kinship caregivers, but more reforms are needed. It is essential that the federal government and the states work together to implement FFPSA and other laws effectively and efficiently. In addition to ensuring successful FFPSA implementation, Congress should take the following steps to further support kinship caregivers more meaningfully:

- **Congress should allow states to use Title IV-E foster care dollars to fund kinship care services and supports.** Many kinship caregivers want to care for children but have limited financial resources, especially those living on a fixed income. Particularly in the child welfare system, kinship families receive fewer supports and resources than other foster parents. This funding source would allow states to use resources more flexibly to provide kinship caregivers access to sustainable, ongoing resources and supports tailored to their unique needs. This is critical to reforming our child welfare system to become more “kin-friendly” and ensure that more children can remain with their families.
- **States must include in their Title IV-E plan details on how they will ensure that all kinship families are made aware of the full range of options and services available through the child welfare agency and in the community.** When they are asked to care for a child, caregivers often lack critical information about the child’s safety and well-being, placement history, reasons for coming into care, and medical needs. In addition, caregivers are often unprepared for the trauma children have experienced. All kinship caregivers want to provide a safe and loving environment but need to fully information of their options and other supports available to them to promote the overall well-being of the child.
- **Congress should expand and add additional funding to the National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) of the Older Americans Act to ensure that kinship caregivers have access to legal representation.** When children and families first become involved in the child welfare system, legal representation is available to all the parties except kinship caregivers. This is especially challenging when caregivers are being ask to make serious, life-altering decisions for the children and themselves. Legal representation is key to helping families makes informed decision and for the child to achieve permanency.

Connecting Unaccompanied Refugee Minors with Culturally-Competent Foster Families and Comprehensive Support Services

Noor Kathem

Executive Summary

A common misconception regarding refugee resettlement is that it is a one-sided obligation charitably extended to those in need. However, when child refugees experience caring, culturally-competent foster families and access to education and other supports, they become engaged, productive citizens. Unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) are children who have resettled in the United States without a parent or relative to care for them. Their families may have been killed in war or become separated in the chaos of fleeing the country. As with other foster youth, URMs experience significant hardship and trauma as they transition into adulthood. Unlike their foster care peers, many of these young people also arrive with the added burden of language barriers, cultural displacement and the continuing psychological impact of war. Congress must do more to assist the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and the states in recruiting and retaining more appropriate foster families and connecting URMs to the full range of services they need to thrive. These resilient young people have undertaken a treacherous journey to seek freedom and our support demonstrates our commitment to peace.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

To ensure URMs are able access a full range of appropriate and culturally-competent services and supports, Congress should:

- Authorize the Department of Health and Human Service's Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide competitive grants that allow states to establish comprehensive Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Navigator Programs that connect URMs with appropriate resources and help them navigate across multiple systems.
- Direct HHS's Administration of Children, Youth and Families to establish a competitive program that allows states to develop targeted strategies to recruit and train culturally-competent, trauma-informed foster families for URMs.

Personal Reflection

The life of a migrant refugee youth is a dangerous one. I was born in Iraq following its wars with Iran and Kuwait and prior to the U.S. invasion in 2003. Despite living in a country that was plagued with oppression, I had a happy childhood playing in the street with my friends. Then, I moved to Jordan to be reunited with my family who had fled from Saddam Hussein. When I arrived, my parents' marriage was in ruins which led to

challenges at home. Jordan was not kind to foreigners. My family had to pay a high price for my education, and we were required to renew our visas every six months. We moved to Syria where I was told that my father had been kidnapped. My mother developed multiple physical and mental health issues that she projected onto me through her abuse and neglect. She kicked me out of the house on a regular basis and left me to fend for myself when I was ten years old. I survived by sleeping on rooftops, under hot car engines and in historic sites. I found different night shift jobs that provided money and a place to stay. I tried to be kind and hope for the best, but I faced discrimination throughout my time in Syria, which made me depressed and sometimes suicidal.

I felt lost when I came to the United States, became an unaccompanied refugee minor and settled in California. State agencies often did not understand how to help me. This was particularly true when I began school. I was desperate to succeed and repeatedly asked to be placed in regular classes that would challenge me. The school refused and considered me a drop-out. Without dedicated foster parents who were teachers and advocated on my behalf for an extra year of school, I would not have graduated high school, gone to college or begun preparing for law school. Without them, I might have given up hope and succumbed to feeling lost. The most critical part of my success was having a foster family that understood me, my culture and the supportive services available to me. Unfortunately, not all URM's have the same opportunities. Even though I was fortunate to have a caring family, there were still many resources that I had to find on my own or were unable to access.

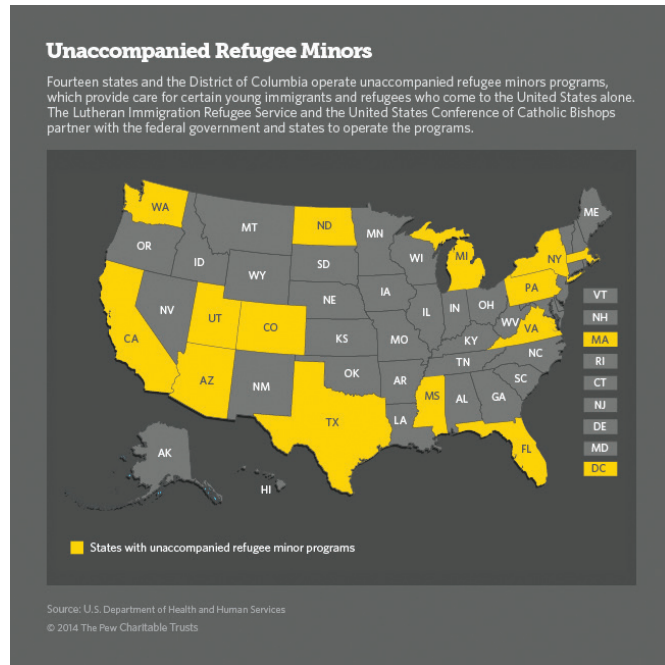
The Problem

Refugee children who have resettled in the United States but do not have a parent or relative to provide for their long-term care are placed in the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program, a federal program overseen by the Department of Health and Human Service's Office of Refugee Resettlement (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2018). The program's goal is to reunify minors with their parents and, if that is not possible, provide foster homes, residential treatment and other services, such as financial support for food and clothing, intensive case management, educational training vouchers, and immigration assistance. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops assists ORR in identifying children who need URM services, finding appropriate foster home placements, and conducting training and technical assistance for service providers.

According to ORR, more than 13,000 minors have entered the URM Program since 1980 (ORR, 2018). Approximately 3,828 children received government assistance and legal protection from deportation; 35% (1,300) of these youth have gone into state foster care systems. Given the relatively small number of URM's, their diverse backgrounds, and language and cultural barriers, state and local foster care agencies and other state entities often struggle to meet their unique needs. As a result, many URM's slip through the cracks instead of being supported in their efforts to pursue an education, seek employment, and connect with the community.

Figure 1. Map of states that operate Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Programs as of 2014. Figure retrieved from Corcoran, 2016.

Although the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program is intended to provide a range of services to refugee youth, the quality and accessibility of services varies based on each state and locality. When URM move to another state for education or employment, it is often difficult to transfer health care services, personal records and financial benefits. This is particularly problematic for the large number of young adult refugees who have experienced mental health challenges such as PTSD and ADHD from abandonment, war trauma and a lifetime of moving from place to place. Refugee minors are vulnerable to psychological issues as their trauma occurs while they are still developing their perception of “normal” life. URM often under-report their psychological needs as their focus is on survival and they have become accepting of hardships as a way of life.



Being a refugee is a chaotic experience that also disrupts the educational process for children. Due to interrupted schooling and language barriers, URM may not be as proficient at standardized testing or knowledgeable about their career options. According to the National Foster Youth Institute (NFYI, 2018), the rate of high school dropouts for foster youth is three times higher than that of other low-income students. Only half of foster care youth graduate high school. Approximately 25% of foster youth were diagnosed with a learning disability as compared to 10% of the general population. URM often struggle with language differences, previous gaps in schooling and adjusting to a new academic and social culture.

As URM struggle with navigating across multiple federal and state agencies, they may also find it difficult to connect with foster families who understand their cultures and the trauma they have endured. While ORR partners, such as The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, are diligently working to develop targeted recruitment and retention strategies for URM foster homes, additional support is needed to develop specialized training to ensure that young people are placed in culturally competent foster families. These foster families need to have resources available to address the challenges of URM psychological trauma as these issues occur.

Current Law

Almost four decades ago, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980 to provide procedures for refugee admissions and to authorize federal resources to help promote their self-sufficiency (Haddal, 2009). The Act also establishes federal URM reimbursement to local child welfare providers until minors turn 18, defines guidelines for establishing legal custody for URMs and mandates that ORR track and maintain relevant information on all URMs. The URM Program works with volunteer services organizations and state child welfare agencies that provide direct services, such as foster care placements and other services, depending on the agency (Haddal, 2009).

Policy Recommendations

To ensure URMs are able access a full range of appropriate and culturally-competent services and supports, Congress should:

- **Authorize the Department of Health and Human Service's Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide competitive grants that allow states to establish comprehensive Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Navigator Programs that connect URMs with appropriate resources and help them navigate across multiple systems.** To address their complex needs and navigate across multiple systems and agencies at the federal, state and local levels, URMs should have information about and direct access to the full range of available government and community services and supports including health care, educational supports, legal representation, language resources, and the opportunity to maintain cultural ties and other connections. States should have the opportunity to compete for federal funds to allow them to create and evaluate these targeted interventions, with a special emphasis on developing effective and scalable technological solutions such as easy-to-use and convenient apps. Grants should also be used to develop new ways to better coordinate information and services across the different agencies and systems serving URMs.
- **Direct HHS's Administration of Children Youth and Families to establish a competitive program that allows states to develop targeted strategies to recruit and train culturally-competent, trauma-informed foster families for URMs.** Finding the right foster families for URMs requires states and localities to develop highly targeted strategies that consider a variety of factors such as cultural competence, shared cultural values, religious affiliation, the ability to understand the psychological and behavioral implications of trauma, and a willingness to meet the individual needs of each child. A competitive demonstration grant program will encourage states to test and evaluate new and more effective ways to recruit, retain and train foster families for URMs. As each state innovates their approach, they must share their insights so that all states will be ready to handle increases in URMs due to disasters. Increasing the number and quality of culturally-competent, trauma-informed foster families will directly enhance the stability and well-being of URMs.

Tools for Opportunity: An In-Depth Look at Childhood Trauma and Prevention Services

Amber Lindamood

Executive Summary

Society often values those born with a specific skill set, one that enables individuals to become independent and productive members of society. But what happens to those who do not have these tools or the opportunity to acquire them? For many youth across the nation, this situation is their reality. These young people experience childhood trauma at disproportionate rates, influencing their cognitive, emotional, physical and executive functioning. Many youth who experience childhood adversity are removed from their family of origin, furthering the extent of the trauma and creating obstacles that prevent them from obtaining the tools needed to take advantage of future opportunities. Themes of independence and possibility are reflected on macro and micro levels of society and in current laws and policy, such as the Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) programs and the Family First Prevention Services Act (H.R. 1872). Though these policies make monumental steps toward progress, prevention assessment and referral processes must be improved to promote accessibility and best practices among children and their families.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

To address childhood trauma and increase accessibility to prevention services, Congress should adopt the following policy recommendations:

- Increase funding for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) programs that allow states to create and expand Family Resource Centers.
- Require that states include in their Title IV-E state plan details on how standardized assessment tools will be used to identify and address children's needs.
- Establish a National Commission to make necessary recommendations to revise the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Personal Reflections

"Always remember, I did this because I loved you." My mother yelled these words in our direction as two policeman held her down and another two carried my brother and I out of our apartment. I didn't know what was happening or where we were going, and, as the door of our apartment slammed shut, we made eye contact for the last time.

I entered foster care at the age of six, and year by year, I began to learn more about my childhood. Year by year, I began to piece together more of my story. I learned that my younger brother and I entered care due to severe allegations of abuse and neglect, maltreatment that our Mom also experienced as a young child. Drug use, starvation, and physical abuse were all parts of the story that led us to where we are today. Although our childhood played an impactful role in our lives, it did not define who we are.

Today, at 24 years of age, I am a second year social work graduate student working part time as a case manager for youth entering foster care. Though it has been 18 years since I was removed from my mother, my heart still aches when I think of where I came from. Questions continue to fill my brain, and those questions ultimately led me to pursue a career in a helping profession. In school, I study the impacts of trauma, and in practice, I see the reality. Week after week, youth tell me their stories, and week after week, I hear themes identical to the scenarios I experienced almost two decades ago. While policies have changed since my time in care, many of the implications are the same, including patterns of intergenerational trauma and limited opportunities for youth to reach their full potential.



The Problem

The “foster care crisis,” a term coined by President Bill Clinton in 1997 (Curtis, Dale Jr. & Kendall, 1999), is being addressed by several solutions ranging from survey tools to community agencies and specific policies impacting youth at risk of entering care. Although there are many concerns about the child welfare system, there are many effective approaches to transform this ‘crisis’ into opportunity for the two-thirds of young people who have experienced trauma across the nation (Children’s Bureau, 2014: National Survey of Children’s Health, 2012).

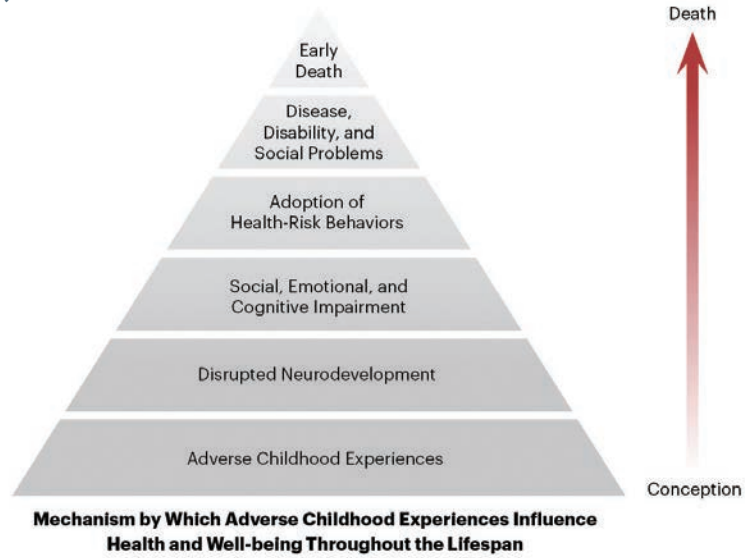
Family Resource Centers (FRCs)

Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are community-based organizations that seek to equip families with beneficial parenting skills, encouraging strong ties to the community. FRCs seek to emphasize prevention efforts, promote family unity and community involvement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.), and reduce the “likelihood of child abuse and neglect” (Children’s Bureau, 2012). Family Resource Centers are critical in communities nationwide as they encourage inclusivity by offering assistance to families of all ages and stages, encourage program participation and eliminate barriers and stigmas related to social service relationships. Among a host of prevention strategies, FRCs are critical in ensuring that families are able to obtain the help they need in a non-punitive, not-stigmatized setting before problems become a crisis and child welfare system involvement becomes necessary.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Forms of childhood trauma, often categorized as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), encompass physical and sexual abuse, neglect and household dysfunction (McKelvey, Conners, Fitzgerald, Kraleti & Whiteside-Mansell, 2017) and are known to influence young people into their adult lives (Pathmar Doydum & Bauer, 2013). The ACEs tool came into existence in the late 1990's with a pilot study conducted by medical researcher, Dr. Vincent Felitti (Dube, Anda, Felitti, Chapman, Williamson & Giles, 2003). The ACEs study was the first of its kind, linking childhood experiences to

adult outcomes by pinpointing 10 specific factors that commonly influence cognitive and physical distress later in life (McKelvey, et al., 2017, p. 426). Though this survey should be expanded to reflect a broader range of influences (California Center for Rural Policy, 2017; Burke Harris, 2018), it continues to be one of the most common and effective guidelines for detecting and defining childhood trauma within the social service field (Albaek, Kinn, & Milde, 2018) and often influences the decision to remove children from their family of origin. ACEs and other evidence-based clinical assessment tools like these play a key role in identifying child and family needs and connecting them with appropriate services and supports.



Current Law

It is extremely important that children are comprehensively evaluated when they first come to the attention of the child welfare system. Presently, however, all states are not required to use a standardized assessment for youth who enter foster care as a condition of federal funding. For the first time, however, the Family First Prevention Services Act created an option for states to use federal IV-E dollars to fund time-limited, evidence-based prevention services. To draw down these funds, the new law also requires states to detail in their state prevention plans standardized assessment tools will be used to determine the type(s) of services children need. In addition to being included as part of a states prevention plan, this assessment requirement should be required in all state IV-E plan to ensure the needs of all IV-E eligible children are being properly identified from the time they first come into the system and throughout their entire time in care.

The Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) programs were established in Title II of the Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) to support community-based efforts to develop and expand a wide range of programs and activities to prevent child abuse and neglect. While the CBCAP programs are an important source of funding for FRCs, funding levels for the program fall far short of the current levels of need. Additional resources are needed to ensure that all communities have access to comprehensive FRCs to prevent the need for and higher cost of foster care down the line.

Policy Recommendations

In order to decrease the prevalence of childhood trauma and to increase child and family access to effective prevention programs, Congress should:

- **Increase funding for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) programs that allow states to create and expand Family Resource Centers.** CBCAP provides states with funding that can be used for Family Resources Centers that provide a range of services to help prevent child abuse and neglect by strengthening and supporting families. Increasing funds to these programs will not only eliminate barriers and increase participation in services, but will also provide families with a more compassionate and less threatening option to obtain assistance before the state child welfare system becomes involved.
- **Require that states include in their Title IV-E state plan details on how they will use a standardized assessment tool to identify and address children's needs.** When a child first comes into foster care, it is critical that the state conducts a comprehensive screening to assess and meet their needs, including the use of ACEs. Once children's needs are identified, the child welfare agency can ensure that children get the full range of trauma-informed supports they need throughout their time in care.
- **Establish a National Commission to make necessary recommendations to revise the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).** Although ACEs continues to be the most widely-used tool for assessing childhood trauma, its components should be expanded to reflect additional social and environmental factors. Congress should direct the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to convene a National ACEs Commission which should consist of the Director of the CDC or his or her designee, the Commissioner of the Administration of Children, Youth and Families, national research experts, advocates for trauma-informed services and clinical experts to determine how ACEs might be expanded and improved for future use.

Policy Report No. 7

Addressing the Needs of a Nation

Ixchel Martinez

Executive Summary

Foster youth are more likely to go through adverse childhood experiences and trauma that compromise their healthy development and contribute to lifelong issues with poor health, poor outcomes, and early death. These early life experiences of trauma and adversity undermine the educational attainment of foster youth by preventing their ability to succeed academically. Within the last decade, many public policies and programs emerged to support children and youth in foster care in ameliorating the disparities they face. However, the policies are incomprehensive and can be further improved to address foster youth disparities nationwide. Extensive research demonstrates that current service delivery systems are not appropriately addressing the mental health and educational disparities that foster youth experience, especially given their unique needs. Evidence-based and trauma-informed policy can improve academic outcomes for young people in the foster care system, which in turn will support their long-term health, development, and well-being over the life course.

Congress should create funding opportunities to encourage a nationwide transition to trauma-informed services within schools to ensure they are capable of meeting the mental health, social and emotional, and developmental needs of all students, especially those most at-risk. Through competitive grants, the development of evidence-based and trauma-informed programs in schools could be brought to scale to address proactively the significant mental health challenges our country faces. By meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in our society, we can enhance the well-being and life success of all in our society. In addition, Congress should make explicit the requirements of state and local education agencies and state child welfare agencies to collaborate and exchange information necessary to address both the educational stability and academic achievement of foster youth.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Congress should authorize competitive state grants through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to assist in the development and implementation of evidence-based and trauma-informed schools that can then be brought to scale across the nation.
- Congress should direct the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education to collect additional data elements on the educational outcomes of youth in foster care, including attendance, graduation rates, dropout rates, number of foster youth with a learning or developmental disability, number of foster youth receiving IEP services, standardized test scores, suspensions and expulsion rates, grade promotion/retention rates, and number of foster youth enrolled in Low-Performing Schools to be reported in its national data collection efforts through the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

Personal Reflection

School was a refuge. It was a consistent place where I could excel despite the tumultuousness and instability of my home environments. While it was a more stable part of my environment, school was not without its difficulties. Despite my success, I still experienced significant mental health issues related to my experiences of trauma. What I really needed from my school was a supportive environment, with a trauma-informed approach that recognized the origin of my challenging behaviors. Since the foster care and education systems did not have that approach, I was left in those settings with significant untapped potential. These experiences inhibited my ability to develop a positive definition of self and to aspire to things greater than I could imagine at the time.



Some adults in my school environment encouraged my potential. My freshman year English teacher recommend I apply for AP English. With his encouragement, I approached my high school counselor to request the opportunity to do so. But the school counselor did not allow me to pursue a more rigorous coursework because of what I can only assume were my behavioral struggles. I felt as though I faced an uphill battle because I did not fit the mold of a traditional honors student, despite my academic talents.

During my time in foster care, my caregivers would not discuss the mental health issues I experienced with child welfare services. My behavior was internalized as opposed to externalized, and so it never rose to the level that they felt needed to be addressed. I didn't trust anyone around me and could not form a relationship in which I felt comfortable articulating my needs to those who might have been able to help me. However, there were clear indicators that I had experienced trauma: my behavioral issues at school and in my foster home.

Instead of support, I felt as though the adults with whom I interacted saw me as a problem. They were disappointed that I did not fall in line with what was expected of me but rarely acknowledged my successes in meeting and even exceeding their expectations. When I struggled, I was punished. I was treated as if I had already done something wrong, and that left me little motivation to rise to the occasion of doing right. Luckily, I had higher expectations of myself through the encouragement of the few who did see me for who I truly was: a person that had already been through a lot in her life but was only beginning. I would not begin to heal from the impact of trauma until I pursued my own passion and interest into mental health when I entered college. I dedicated myself to the academic work I found personally meaningful, receiving a double major in human development and psychology.

The outcomes for youth in care are among the most detrimental observed in our society. Given the neural plasticity of this vulnerable developmental period, it is critical to ensure that the systems serving young people who are experiencing difficulties do so in a way that can promote their healing and ability to thrive no matter what their environment. We should not expect young people to overcome these significant obstacles the way that I did. Instead, public policy should provide them with the supports they need to thrive and should proactively address the needs of traumatized youth, both in care and in our schools.

The Problem

Children and youth in foster care experience significant mental health and educational disparities in comparison to their peers as a result of traumatic life circumstances and adversity both in and out of care. Youth in foster care are two times more likely to be absent from school compared to other students (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education [NWGFCE], 2018). Those ages 17-18 are two times more likely to be suspended and three times more likely to be expelled in comparison to peers not in care (NWGFCE, 2018). In addition, foster youth are also more likely to be placed in special education services; and only between 41 to 63 percent of foster youth attain a high school diploma or GED (NWGFCE, 2018). As these young people develop and mature, they face significant disadvantages for achieving economic stability and independence in adulthood.

One of the main contributors to this issue is the prevalence and impact of trauma on their healthy development, social and emotional functioning, and behavior. Foster youth typically possess a high number of adverse childhood experience risk factors, which are correlated with a myriad of negative life outcomes (e.g. mental illness, substance abuse, chronic health disease) (Bruskas & Tessin, 2013; Center for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2016). Over the course of their development, foster youth are subjected to chronic toxic stress system activation – an intense stress without relief that results from experiencing maltreatment in the absence of a nurturing relationship with a caring adult to assist in self-regulation (Harvard Center on the Developing Child [HCDC], n.d.). Chronic activation of the “fight-or-flight” system over time is associated with harmful impacts to the biological system that can compromise healthy brain development and functioning, including learning, memory, and emotional regulation over the life course (HCDC, n.d.; Miller, n.d.). Foster youth’s increased risk of suspension and expulsion is most likely a reflection of the trauma they face and how school systems recognize and respond to that trauma within its environment. This is critical to addressing the needs of children and youth who have experienced trauma.

Given the specific mental health risks and educational challenges foster youth face, it is not surprising that they are at risk for such grave life outcomes and demonstrate such disparities even in comparison to other at-risk student populations (i.e. low-income, English language learners) (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). In addition, federal laws designed to promote educational stability among foster youth are incomprehensive and have been insufficient as a result of inadequate federal funding and oversight. In order to better serve children and youth in foster care, we need the systems that serve them to cooperate strategically in order to prevent and address the mental health and educational disparities that we see in this population.

Current Law

Despite an increased understanding of the mental health and educational disparities children in foster care face, there remain significant deficits in federal policy and funding to intervene effectively in promoting the health, wellbeing, and school stability of youth in care. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 marked the first step in enacting critical policies that require child welfare agencies to promote and prioritize the educational stability of youth in foster care. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) added similar provisions requiring educational agencies to administer services to foster youth in coordination with child welfare agencies. To ensure the appropriate implementation of these laws, Congress has an opportunity to expand current policies and address the current gaps to improve the wellbeing and academic success of youth in foster care while also promoting schools’ transitions to trauma-informed learning environments.

Recommendations

- Congress should authorize competitive state grants through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to assist in the development and implementation of evidence-based and trauma-informed services in school settings that can then be brought to scale across the nation.

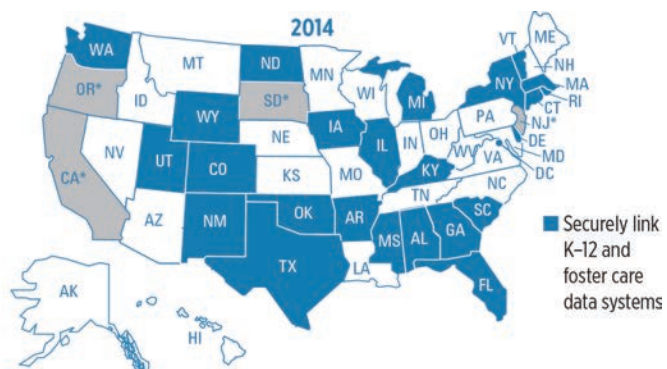
These programs should target every individual within the school system ensuring a trauma-informed environment and school culture. Mental health education and support should be built into school services. Universal mental health services implemented within school settings can do much to improve the lifelong wellbeing of our nations people. Providing our youth with the necessary skills in understanding how to effectively manage emotions, social relationship, and learn to cope with the myriad of difficulties that they will inevitably encounter in life (i.e. grief & loss, relational issues, and trauma) is important to promoting positive health and wellbeing. Trauma-sensitive schools that foster a positive learning environment for all students are better equipped to address the specific social and emotional needs of children and youth in foster care who oftentimes experience complex trauma.

- Congress should direct the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education to collect additional data elements on the educational outcomes of youth in foster care, including attendance, graduation rates, dropout rates, number of foster youth with a learning or developmental disability, number of foster youth receiving IEP services, standardized test scores, suspensions and expulsion rates, grade promotion/retention rates, and number of foster youth enrolled in Low-Performing Schools to be reported in its national data collection efforts the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

In order to meet foster youth's specific educational needs Congress should make specific the mandates for data tracking and systems collaboration between education institutions and child welfare service agencies. Data for Action reports that 24 states and the District of Columbia share foster care data between education and child welfare agencies (see Figure 1.) (Data Quality Campaign, 2015). Collecting educational information regarding foster youth is necessary for determining educational trends and for the development of data-informed law and policy.

Figure 1. States with Securely Linked K-12 and Foster Care Data Systems

By securely sharing limited, critical information about how students in foster care fare in education, the K-12 and child welfare sectors can collaborate more effectively to best support these students. According to *Data for Action 2014*,* 24 states and the District of Columbia report that they securely link K-12 data systems with foster care data systems.



*The Data Quality Campaign's *Data for Action* is a series of analyses that highlight state progress and key priorities to promote the effective use of data to improve student achievement. California, New Jersey, Oregon, and South Dakota did not participate in 2014. For more information, including contact information for state respondents, visit www.dataqualitycampaign.org/DFA2014.

Transforming Extended Foster Care: More Meaningful Preparation for a Brighter Future

Alison Myers

Executive Summary

The aging out process is failing most foster youth. While there are many programs in place to make the transition to adulthood easier, such as transitional living programs and financial education, foster youth still leave care unequipped for the real world. This is largely due to the fact that their transition plans are developed too late and the requirements for extended care do not focus on their personal growth. Congress should work to improve the aging out process to better prepare these young adults for adulthood. This paper proposes that Congress provide states with funding to extend foster care to age 21 and up to 23, make the requirements for extended care more meaningful by incorporating components focused on well-being, and require states to start collaborating on a future plan with youth earlier in the process to ensure a more effective transition to adulthood.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Congress should require all states to extend foster care to age 21, and give them the option to extend to age 23 while providing states with additional funding grants to implement this requirement.
- Congress should replace both the current transition plan and the requirements to receive extended care services with the single obligation of following an “Individualized Advancement Plan” (IAP). The IAP would dually serve as a transitional plan from ages 16 – 18 and as the conditions to receive extended care services from ages 18– 23.

Personal Reflection

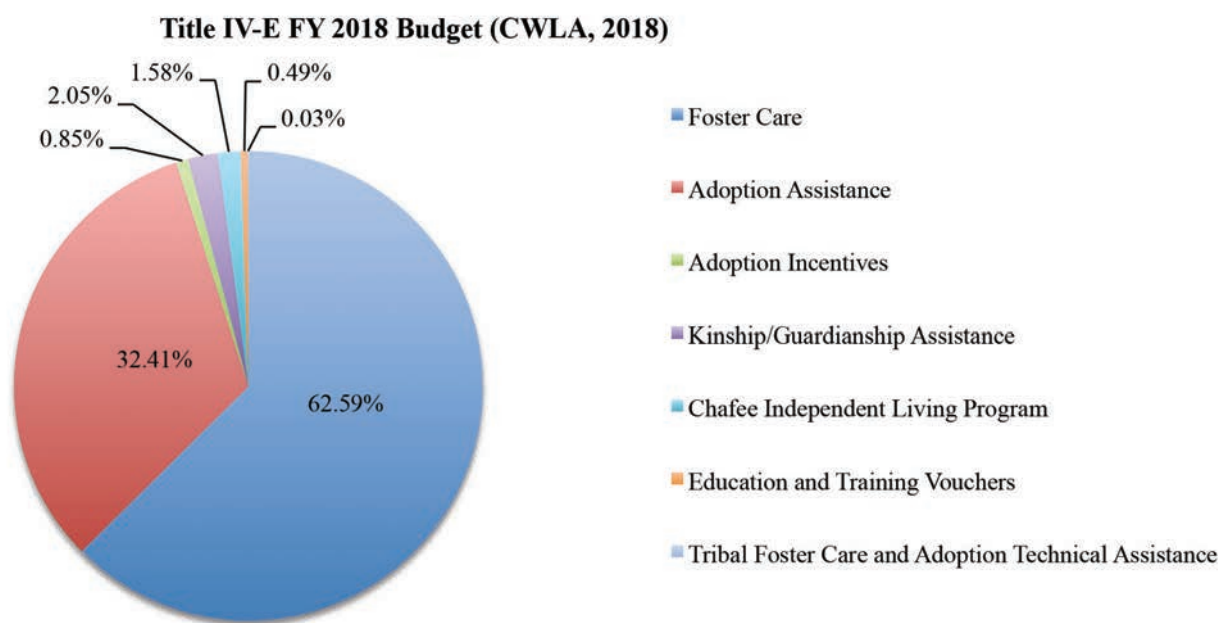
Improving the aging out process is very important to me because I aged out of the foster care system in Illinois in May 2018, and my younger sister is currently within the age range of eligibility to receive extended care services. My own transition plan was developed just 90 days prior to my 18th birthday. The short time for preparation caused me to feel too rushed, which led me to ignore important areas of my development that needed attention during this time of my life. Instead of focusing on my current and future overall well-being, I spent this planning period focused on ensuring that I could meet the requirements to stay in care and hold onto the benefits I had, all while struggling on and off with depression and anxiety. The process felt more like a checklist rather than what it was intended to be: a mechanism to assist me and guide me toward a successful future.



While I was lucky enough to have support from nonprofits and adults who took interest in me during my transition to adulthood, others like my sister, who has struggled with addiction since we entered foster care in 2011, do not receive the same support. On my sister's 18th birthday, she was kicked out of our foster home of three years without much warning. This sudden move triggered a relapse and forced her into depression, which prevented her from being able to meet the requirements necessary to qualify for extended care. With me being away at school and no intervention from her caseworker, she had virtually no support to pick her back up. Although she was obviously struggling, in the eyes of the state, she was just not able to meet the requirements and therefore did not qualify for extended care benefits. Fortunately, today she is doing much better, but we both feel that the system did not do all it could to assist either of us during the aging out process. What we both needed were individualized plans that focused on our own personal growth, such as going to therapy, attending rehabilitation services, or pursuing a college degree, to more meaningfully prepare us for our future goals and life outside of the foster care system.

The Problem

Every year, 8% of all foster youth age out of the system. Although this percentage may seem low, it represents 28,000 foster youth, a number that has remained relatively unchanged over the past twelve years. Between 2006 and 2016, the rate of youth aging out has only decreased by one percent, from 9% to 8% (Children's Bureau, 2008, 2017). Congress has focused on many policy reforms on transition-aged youth, but it has not provided adequate funding to support a positive transition to adulthood for these young people. The FY 2018 budget authorizes only 2.1% of Title IV-E funding to be used for foster care transitional services, such as the Chafee Independent Living Program and Education and Training Vouchers (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2018).



Many studies have shown that extended care leads to positive outcomes for youth well into the future. For example, Illinois, which extended foster care to 21, had twice the number of foster youth who finished one year of college compared to Iowa and Wisconsin, which stopped care at age 18 during the time of this study (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009). A Chapin Hall study surveying foster youth found that about 63% of foster youth participants said extended care is helping youth “a lot” to make progress towards their goal of independence and about 58% said it is helping “a lot” towards their educational goals (Courtney et al., 2016). Unfortunately, only 25 states currently extend foster care to age 21 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017). Extended care is an expensive investment and may be unattractive for some states, as the federal government only reimburses states between 50%-83% of the cost (Peters et al., 2009).

Even the states that do offer extended care are not going far enough. The current requirements for extended care address education and employment, but they leave out several crucial dimensions relating to wellness and human development. In order maximize one’s life, one must nourish all dimensions of life: spiritual, physical, emotional, occupational, intellectual, environmental, and social (Princeton University & University of Wisconsin Stevens Point [UWSP], 2018). Neglecting any one of these dimensions for a long period of time can result in adverse effects to one’s health (UWSP, 2018). These adverse effects can be seen in the outcomes of youth who age out. One study showed that one in five foster youth who age out of care become homeless, one in four become involved in the criminal justice system, and about half are unemployed (Witzl, 2015). Another study found that one in two foster youth who age out will develop a substance dependency and less than 3% will obtain a college degree (National Foster Youth Institute, 2017). Changing the requirements for care to focus on advancing the youth in every aspect of life deemed important would not only make extended care accessible to more youth, but would also have long term, beneficial effects on them.

The main source of future planning for foster youth is through their transition plan, which is meant to prepare them to be independent in society. However, a Chapin Hall study showed that the top reasons youth returned to care were for financial help for living expenses, finding a place to live, and seeking support from a case manager, previous caregiver, or other adult (Courtney et al., 2016). All of these reasons are areas identified in current transition planning. This study also found that about 30% of youth who choose to leave care were not even aware of their transition plan and 41% of these youth were not involved in team meetings about their plan (Courtney et al., 2016). The findings suggest that the current transition plan is not working in the way it is intended. This planning is starting too late and with too little collaboration from youth to properly prepare them for their transition to adulthood, which leaves many unequipped to face the real world. Starting this planning at the age of 16 would give the youth a minimum of two years to properly prepare for their transition and adjust their plan as needed.

Current Law

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) allowed states to extend foster care to age 21. This landmark reform was made in response to research, which has made clear that extending foster care leads to better outcomes.

The Act also required states to ensure that youth who remain in care beyond age 18 be “enrolled in school, employed at least 80 hours a month, or participating in an activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment...” or, “living independently in a supervised setting.” These requirements can only be waived if the youth is deemed “incapable” of meeting them due to a medical condition (Stoltzfus, 2008, p. 9). For youth who meet the requirements, extended care benefits may include services related to housing, medical and dental insurance, independent living skills training, case management, and access to community resources (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2018).

Lastly, the Act required states to work with young people at risk of aging out to develop a transition plan “no earlier than 90 days before the child’s 18th birthday” (Stoltzfus, 2008, p. 10). The transition plan must include the youth’s plans for housing, education, health insurance, employment, and support systems after they age out (Stoltzfus, 2008).

Policy Recommendations

- **Congress should require all states to extend foster care to age 21, and give them the option to extend to age 23 while providing states with additional funding grants to implement this requirement.**

Federal “seed” funding is needed to help financially support states to make the leap to extend foster care to at least age 21, and give them the option to extend it to age 23. Extending foster care in all states will provide the opportunity for more young people to remain in foster care through critical developmental periods in their lives, including becoming a legal adult, transitioning to higher education, and beginning employment.

- **Congress should replace both the current transition plan and the requirements to receive extended care services with the single obligation of following an “Individualized Advancement Plan” (IAP). The IAP would dually serve as a transitional plan from ages 16 – 18 and as the conditions to receive extended care services from ages 18– 23.**

IAPs should focus on well-being goals including, but not be limited to, education, employment, mental health services, addiction services, trauma healing processes, and social interaction programs. It should also focus on concrete supports such as housing, social supports, health insurance, transportation, and financial budgeting. For example, one individual could have an IAP that requires him or her to attend college and participate in tutoring for Calculus, while another could have an IAP that requires him or her to attend group therapy services and participate in job-training programs. The social workers and youth should meet once a month to reevaluate the plan and make changes as needed, with the goal of pushing the youth to be their very best and reach higher. Beginning to develop each youth’s IAP at age 16 will give youth more time to plan for their future, learn tools for independence, receive guidance from social workers, and make any changes necessary to turn their goals into a reality.

Acceptance and Empowerment: Helping LGBTQ+ Youth in Foster Care through Training, Data Collection and Non-Discrimination Laws

Terrence (Terry) Scraggins
(Pronouns: He/Him/His)

Executive Summary

Youth in care who identify as LGBTQ+ are over-represented in the child welfare system and face unique challenges. LGBTQ+ youth are at greater risk of experiencing violence, and they are at higher risk of experiencing negative health and life outcomes such as poor educational outcomes and mental health issues. With such knowledge and information, it is imperative that the foster care placement process be revised. To improve the experience of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care, Congress must improve the foster care placement processes by screening youth entering care for sexual orientation and gender identity, ensuring that individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ are not discriminated against and can become foster parents, and requiring states to provide training for all professionals and foster parents working within the child welfare system on the special needs of LGBTQ+ youth.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- HHS should swiftly implement the 2016 Final Rule on AFCARS, including the data elements related to LGBTQ+ youth in foster care. States should begin screening youth, on a voluntary basis, on whether they identify as LGBTQ+.
- Congress must pass the Every Child Deserves a Family Act (S. 1303/H.R. 2640) to ensure more individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ can become foster parents.
- Congress should require states to provide training for youth, foster parents and professionals working within the child welfare system on the needs of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care.

Personal Reflection

Although I didn't quite understand the terminology, around age 13 I knew I identified as homosexual. Growing up in a very conservative Boise, Idaho presented many barriers to my development as an adolescent. As a bi-racial gay male with a state population that was only 0.8% African-Americans, I struggled with acceptance and felt different compared to my peers. During the six years I spent in foster care, I lived in more than 20 placement settings. It was not until I was placed with my grandparents at age sixteen that anyone asked me about my sexual orientation or for my input on where I would prefer to be placed.

While in foster care, I frequently felt I was treated differently because of my sexuality, even though I never openly stated how I identified. For example, one of my foster parents told me that my male friends couldn't share a blanket with me in the living room. Another one of my foster parents even said to me: "Gay people

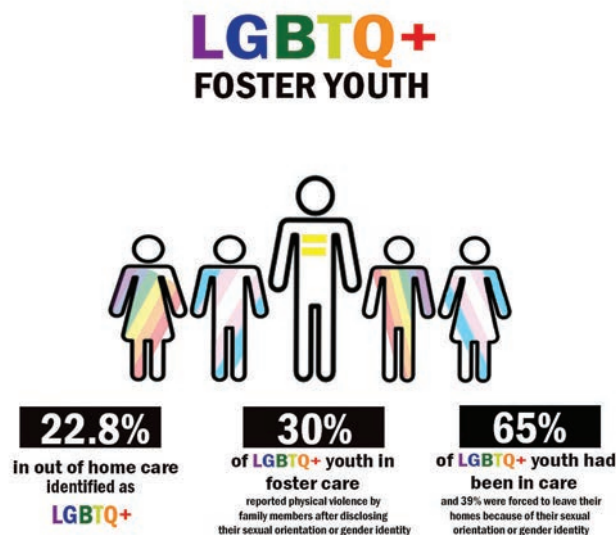
are sinners who have no direction in life.” When moving from one placement to the next, I was informed that my previous foster parents consulted with my foster-parents-to-be about my sexuality, which led to discrimination and tension before I even arrived. None of my foster parents had any education or training on how to support me during the discovery of my sexuality, and my consent and input on placement were rarely valued or even asked. My quality of life within the child welfare system would have been drastically more positive had there been individuals whom I could turn to during times of need. To feel support rather than ridicule and judgment would have made all the difference in my development as a teenager.

The Problem

According to the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being-II (NSCAW-II), approximately 22.8 percent of children in out-of-home care identified as LGBTQ+ (Martin, Down, & Erney, 2016). Research also shows that LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in foster care. According to a recent study in Los Angeles County, for example, approximately one out of every five foster youth identified as LGBTQ+ (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). Studies also show that youth in foster care who identify as LGBTQ+ have lower self-esteem and a much greater chance of health problems as adults (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWLA], 2013). They are more than three times more likely to abuse illegal substances, three times more likely to be at high risk for contracting HIV and other STDs, almost six times more likely to experience high levels of depression, and more than eight times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers in foster care who do not identify as LGBTQ+ (CWLA, 2013).

LGBTQ+ youth in care often experience more placements than non-LGBTQ+ youth. According to the NSCAW-II, 19.6 percent of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care were moved from their first placement because of a caregiver request, compared to 8.6 percent of their heterosexual peers in foster care (Martin et al., 2016). It is essential that LGBTQ+ youth be placed in homes that can provide moral and developmental support, so they are able to continue to heal and grow once removed from their once stable homes. Ensuring homes are safe and supportive for all youth is imperative, but having more parents who identify within the LGBTQ+ community would certainly improve quality of life for youth who identify within this community.

LGBTQ+ youth enter foster care for many reasons, many of which are different from other youth in foster care. Sometimes they come to foster care after rejection by their families based on their sexual or gender identity. Others come from dysfunctional families and backgrounds that involve both abuse and neglect,



causing them to be removed from their homes for their safety and well-being (Wilber, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006). LGBTQ+ youth come to foster care in a traumatic state, and they need foster families who are prepared to respond to their needs.

Current Law

Although there are certain constitutional protections that apply to LGBTQ+ youth in foster care, there has been virtually no action at the federal level to address the needs of this vulnerable population. Bipartisan groups of members of Congress from both the House and Senate have introduced the Every Child Deserves a Family Act (S. 1303/H.R. 2640), which would restrict Title IV-E funding for states that discriminate against LGBTQ+ foster parents, but that bill has stalled in Congress. Virtually all policy activity related to LGBTQ+ youth has taken place at the state level.

The Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution provides protections for youth in foster care to have reasonable safe living conditions, freedom from any psychological harm and psychological deterioration, and access to adequate care and reasonably suitable placement (Wilson, Cook, Erney, Cherepon, & Gentile, 2017).

Currently there are no federal policies or statutes in place to encourage all-inclusive placements or trainings related to issues impacting LGBTQ+ youth for foster parents and professionals working with youth. The federal government has acknowledged the unique needs of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care by taking steps to collect data on this population through the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). In a Final Rule published on December 14, 2016, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) required state child welfare agencies to begin collecting and reporting data on LGBTQ+ youth in foster care. Unfortunately, in March 2018, HHS announced that it would be delaying the implementation of the final rule due to concerns about undue burden on states (Administration on Children, Youth and Families [ACYF], 2016).

Only fourteen states have passed policies prohibiting discrimination against sexual orientation and gender identity for young people in foster care, and seven states have passed foster care non-discrimination laws or policies aimed at expression of sexual orientation alone (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). These laws are important in protecting LGBTQ+ foster parents from discrimination by foster care agencies and other officials (Movement Advancement Project, 2018). The passage of this legislation will also help to ensure that youth feel comfortable if/when they have additional needs or questions that may arise while developing and emerging as adults within the LGBTQ+ community.

Policy Recommendations

- **HHS should swiftly implement the 2016 Final Rule on AFCARS, including the data elements related to LGBTQ+ youth in foster care. States should begin screening youth, on a voluntary basis, on whether they identify as LGBTQ+.**

There has never been any source of federal data with regard to LGBTQ+ young people in foster care.

The federal government took an important step forward for LGBTQ+ youth in foster care by including data collection and reporting on this population in the December 2016 updates to the AFCARS. Unfortunately, citing concerns about burden to states, HHS has delayed the implementation of these updates, and they have signaled that the LGBTQ+ provisions in particular might be eliminated. Given that AFCARS has not been revised since 1993, it is past time for our federal data collection system to be updated. This data collection and reporting is critical to informing future policy decisions aimed at better supporting these youth in the future.

Studies have shown that same-sex attraction for males and females typically occurs around the age of 10 (Herd & McClintock, 2000); however, disclosure to by foster youth who identify as LGBTQ+ should be voluntary and only allowable by young people aged 13 and older. Young people need time to understand their sexual identity and reporting before age 13 may yield increased or uneducated reporting. Voluntary disclosure is crucial, as this is an already fragile community. State foster agencies should also be required to take this information on gender identity and sexual orientation into consideration when determining what is in the best interest of the youth in care and when making decisions about short or long-term placements based on feedback from such intake processes.

- **Congress should pass, without delay, the Every Child Deserves a Family Act (S. 1303/H.R. 2640) to ensure more individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ can become foster parents.**

Young people in foster care who identify as LGBTQ+ need access to safe and supportive foster homes. Currently there are only 14 states with foster care non-discrimination laws or policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). The Every Child Deserves a Family Act (S. 1303/H.R. 2640), a bipartisan bill that has already been introduced in Congress, will make more foster and adoptive homes available by restricting federal funding to states that tolerate discriminatory practices in adoption and foster care placements based on sexual orientation and gender identity of the foster parents and foster youth. The passage of this legislation will also help to ensure that youth feel comfortable if/when they have additional needs or questions that may arise while developing and emerging as adults within the LGBTQ+ community.

- **Congress should require states to provide training for youth, foster parents and professionals working within the child welfare system on the needs of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care.**

In order to improve outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth, it is critical to increase education and training related to this population. Congress should require states, through the Title IV-E state plans, to provide training to key individuals on the needs of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care. This training should be required for all professionals serving foster youth, foster parents and other caregivers, and other foster youth placed in care. Key elements of the training should include: (1) educational materials on the overrepresentation of the LGBTQ+ community placed within foster care; (2) training to recognize, acknowledge and support the differences between LGBTQ+ youth and their counterparts; (3) strategies regarding how to educate and raise LGBTQ+ youth and; (4) how to identify risk factors and behaviors associated with the LGBTQ+ community in order to provide appropriate resources for youth in care.

You Must Learn: Connecting Foster Youth to Social Capital and Higher Education

Jordan Sosa

Executive Summary

Young people who are in and aging out of foster care often lack mentors and support systems to help them navigate through their journey in care and transition into adulthood. This lack of support contributes to many negative outcomes later in life, including low unemployment rates, increasing rates of poverty, dependence on public assistance programs, criminal involvement, and poor health. Such socio-economic conditions are costing United States taxpayers considerable investments. To improve outcomes for transition-age youth in foster care and youth at risk of entering the child welfare system, Congress should devote additional resources to mentoring programs and higher education opportunities. Solutions to improve outcomes for foster youth and at-risk youth could be achieved by scaling programs like Youth Villages and the Guardian Scholars Program at California State University-Fullerton. Programs like these provide important on-campus supports to former young people and help them address a wide range of emotional, mental and behavioral problems. Increasing funding for these and other evidence-based programs will expand access to all the foster youth who need them and provide significant opportunities for meaningful social and emotional connection.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Congress should authorize grant programs to fund and scale programs like Guardian Scholars in California, which provides comprehensive supports to young people in college who have spent time in the foster care system.
- Congress should pass the Foster Youth Mentoring Act (H.R. 2952) which creates a grant program within Title IV-B of the Social Security Act to provide mentoring programs for youth in foster care.
- Congress should pass the Mentoring to Succeed Act (S. 1658) which amends the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 to give the Department of Education the authority to award grants to school-based mentoring programs to assist at-risk students in middle and high school.

Personal Reflection

When I was nine years old and living in a van, I thought college was nothing but an impossible dream. Due to domestic violence and drug abuse, my parents could not provide adequate care for my family, so my siblings and I lived in vans, shelters, motels, and couch-surfed from one home to another until the Department of Children and Family Services placed us in foster care, where I stayed before aging out of care at age 18. My transition out of foster care was challenging. During my first year at California State University-Fullerton, I struggled to find a supportive community and felt intimidated by the college environment. I feel lucky that in my second year I was accepted into the Guardian Scholars Program, a

comprehensive support program exclusively for current and former foster youth, which provided much-needed financial support and, even more important, connected me with individuals who had spent time in foster care and helped me recognize my self-worth. The program also connected me to mentors who helped me navigate life as both a college student and an independent adult with responsibilities. My mentors from the Guardian Scholars Program later introduced me to California Youth Connection (CYC), an advocacy organization run by current and former foster youth. CYC has allowed me to participate in leadership roles in which I can voice my experiences and concerns with the foster care system at a local level in Orange County and at the state level in California.

Being involved with the Guardian Scholars Program and CYC gave me many opportunities I would not have had otherwise. Through these programs, I conducted outreach and community education events that focused on the rights of foster youth, advocated for community resources for at-risk youth, foster youth and other issues. These experiences also led me to partner with Orangewood Foundation, one of the leading providers of Independent Living services in Orange County where I have made important personal connections and helped to mentor foster youth transitioning to independence. The mentoring I received is what has allowed me to be in a position to help younger foster youth.

(This photo was taken when I was eight at Indianapolis, Indiana before entering the foster care system)



The Problem

Although the foster care system is designed as a temporary intervention, older youth in foster care often spend many years in care and age out without a permanent family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). These young people face many challenges ranging from high dropout rates, educational instability, and high rates of disabilities. According to the National Foster Youth Institute (2015), approximately half of all foster youth in the United States complete high school, and less than 3 percent graduate from a four-year college (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Reilly, 2003). Only 19 percent of foster youth 19 years of age and older enroll in a post-secondary program (National Foster Youth Institute, 2015). In comparison, the national average in United States of 19-year-olds enrolled in college is 36 percent (The National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council, 2017). The child welfare system is not only failing foster youth, but also makes it harder for young people to get an education, connect with mentors, live independently, and become productive members of society.

The majority of services aimed at supporting young people in care relies only on professionals like social workers, case managers, probation officers, and therapists. As a result, there is a pervasive lack of focus on cultivating meaningful relationships between the young people and other adults who could help guide

and support them. This lack of focus is demonstrated in the barriers foster youth face in accessing family ties, school-based relationships, mentors, community connections, and culturally-inclusive supports (The National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council, 2017). The best mentors are often people who are already part of the young person's life, such as relatives, neighbors, teachers, friends and others who can become a confidant and advocate for the young person (The British Journal of Social Work, 2017).

Research shows the many benefits of mentoring in a young person's life. These benefits can include better attendance at and attitudes toward school, decreased use of drugs and alcohol, improved social skills and interactions with peers, more trusting relationships, better communication with their caregivers, and an increased chance to pursue higher education (MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, 2006). Developing trust through mentorship encourages human service professionals and caregivers to be involved in the youths' lives, discuss their school relationships, and help build the necessary skills to maintain a healthy relationship.

By providing a structure that encourages and strengthens existing relationships and supports within communities, mentoring can help foster empowerment within the young person and build his or her social capital (Coleman 1988; Rappaport 1981). In fact, research suggests that efforts to build social capital through existing social connections, like mentors, are more effective than attempts to create social networks where they do not already exist (Portes & Landolt, 2000). Youth who do not have opportunities to build their own social capital face high rates of unemployment, poverty, public assistance dependence, criminal involvement, incarceration, and health difficulties, and represent a substantial economic cost to the country through lost wages, taxes, and productivity (Brock 2010; Cohen 1998). This support can be integral to access postsecondary education and gear youth to scan available resources.

Eligibility requirements for college resources vary in a number of ways from age requirements, the amount of time youth spent in foster care, or where they were placed in foster care. While states have invested in foster youth to increase rates to obtain a postsecondary degree, there is a lack of consistency across states on how support is provided to current and former foster youth (Education Commission of the States, 2017).

Young people in foster care need the opportunity to build healthy, trusting relationships with mentors. Given that youth in foster care have suffered significant trauma, it is especially important that they have access to positive mentors who can help them transition into adulthood. With increased self-efficacy, at-risk youth and foster youth will be able to prepare for the transition out of the foster care system and live independently or continue to preserve a healthy relationship with their caregivers.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

COMMON REQUIREMENTS



Submit the FAFSA



Use tuition assistance at an eligible institution



Maintain satisfactory academic performance

ADDITIONAL ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- Age limits for program participation
- Amount of time student was in foster care
- What the tuition includes/covers
- Amount of funding/number of awards
- Personal financial requirements
- Additional scholarship applications

(Source: Education Commission of the States)

Current Law

The federal government has taken steps to support older youth in foster care in a number of ways. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program provides federal funding to states to provide transition planning and preparation services, primarily in the form of independent living programs. In addition, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) mandated that “transition planning” for older youth who were likely to age out of foster care should begin 90 days before their emancipation date. In 2014, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-183) required that states take steps to ensure “normalcy” for older youth in foster care such as being able to spend the night at a friend’s house, participate in sports and other extracurricular activities, and go on family trips.

President George W. Bush signed the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins IV; P.L. 109-270) into law. The Act provides a focus on the academic achievement of career and technical education (CTE) programs, strengthens students’ connections to secondary and postsecondary education, and improves state and local accountability. Perkins IV authorizes five primary programs: Basic State Grants program, the Tech Prep Grant Program, Tribally Controlled Postsecondary Career and Technical Institutions grant program (TCPCTIP), National Programs, and Occupational and Employment Information. Despite their success, more can be done to ensure that these programs address trauma-informed care and interventions that expand mentoring programs serving at-risk youth (MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, 2018).

Currently, 28 states offer some type of state-level tuition assistance program for former foster youth seeking postsecondary education. Twenty-two states utilize tuition waivers, and eight states provide grants or scholarships to current and former foster youth. Although no tuition assistance is the same between states, there are some common requirements like students submitting a financial aid application (Education Commission of the States, 2017).

Having a supportive relationship in an educational environment can be a powerful component of the overall well-being of foster youth. Despite significant recent Congressional attention to issues impacting older youth in foster care, however, there has been no significant federal action to promote mentoring among young people in foster care and supports to young people in college who have spent time in the foster care system.

Policy Recommendations:

- **Congress should create a grant program to help fund and scale programs like the Guardian Scholars Program in California, which provides comprehensive supports to young people in college who have spent time in the foster care system.**

The Guardian Scholars Program was a transformational experience for me during my college career. My participation in the program helped ensure my educational and future success by connecting me to important mentors who provided much-needed emotional support and guidance to help me transition into adulthood. Unfortunately, not all states have initiatives like the Guardian Scholars Program to

help foster youth pursuing higher education. These young people need more support than their peers in college, and it is vital that they are able to access the necessary supports to help them succeed educationally and become independent, thriving adults.

In 2016, The City University of New York launched the CUNY Start-ASAP Foster Care Initiative (FCI) to support the success of youth foster care at CUNY. The program connects students between the ages of 17 to 25 who were part of the New York City foster care system by providing a defined pathway for students to complete an associate degree. FCI staff created strategic partnerships with multiple human service agencies across New York City to create a streamlined referral process for services and provide college resources through college advisement, financial aid support, paid internships, and social engagement activities. CUNY is another example of how a program that offers comprehensive support to current and former foster youth in college can invest an individual's social capital and higher education.

- **Congress should pass the Foster Youth Mentoring Act (H.R. 2952) which creates a grant program within Title IV-B of the Social Security Act to provide mentoring programs for youth in foster care.**

Providing meaningful mentorship experiences for all older youth in foster care will require a substantial federal investment. The Foster Youth Mentoring Act of 2017 (H.R. 2952), which was introduced by Rep. Karen Bass of California and referred to the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources, would create a grant program within Title IV-B of the Social Security Act to promote mentoring programs for young people in foster care. I recommend that Congress pass this bill to give more young people the chance I got to foster mentoring relationships that transform their lives. Congress should prioritize this bill to help youth in foster care to transition back into their families, a new adoptive family, or live independently. Congress should also consider allowing Title IV-E dollars to support mentoring programs for more sustainable funding for these programs in the future. As with the recent Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123), H.R. 2952 will ensure that participating mentor programs develop quality standards to ensure best practices, including screening program volunteers, implementing a matching process between mentors and mentees, and providing training to mentors to assure they can access appropriate child welfare resources.

- **Congress should pass the Mentoring to Succeed Act (S. 1658) which amends the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 to give the Department of Education the authority to award grants to school-based mentoring programs to assist at-risk students in middle school and high school.**

The Mentoring to Succeed Act will authorize the Department of Education to award competitive grants to mentorship programs like the Guardian Scholars to assist at-risk students in middle school and high school in developing cognitive and social-emotional skills. This legislation will prepare at-risk students for success in high school, postsecondary education, and the workforce.

Meet the Interns



BRITTNEY BARROS

U.S. Senator Gary Peters

FOSTER CARE: Michigan

EDUCATION: Eastern Michigan University

RESIDES: Michigan

AGE: 20

Brittney Barros is an undergraduate student at Eastern Michigan University majoring in Social Work and minoring in Music. Brittney is passionate about advocating for foster, at-risk, and homeless youth. She serves as an advocate to spread awareness about the issues such youth face through her work for Ozone House and her positions as President of the Michigan Youth Opportunity Initiative and State Co-Director for the Parkwest Foundation. Brittney desires to enact policy changes within the system, and her long-term goals include becoming both a foster care worker and parent.

CALLI CROWDER

U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley

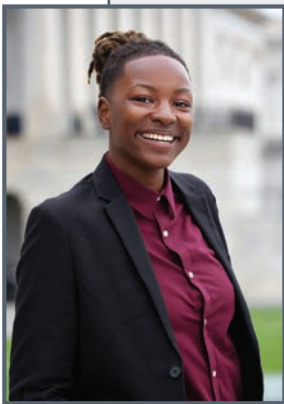
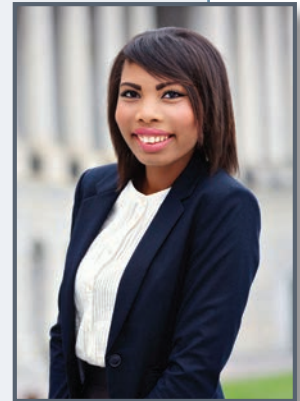
FOSTER CARE: Ohio

EDUCATION: Regent University

RESIDES: Ohio

AGE: 25

Calli Crowder is a graduate of Regent University where she majored in International Studies and minored in Psychology. Calli desires to use her experiences in the foster care system to advocate for the rights of foster care youth and make policy changes at the national and international level. Calli seeks to ensure that all foster care youth are aware of their individual rights and have access to necessary resources to achieve success. Calli's goal is to improve the aging out process for transition-age youth by providing services and support to foster parents to help aging-out youth succeed, such as by helping youth obtain driver's licenses.



SHAY HOUSE

U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar

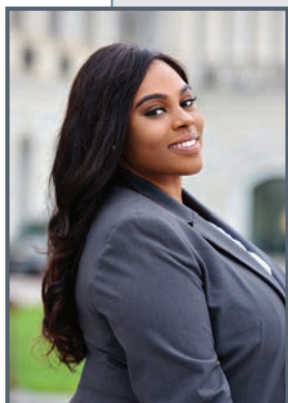
FOSTER CARE: California

EDUCATION: Mills College

RESIDES: California

AGE: 22

Shay House is an undergraduate student at Mills College. Shay is pursuing a self-designed major in Politics and Urban Inequalities, and plans to continue her education and receive a Master's Degree in Public Policy. Shay developed a passion for policy during her internship experience with the National Women's Law Center last summer, and she is especially passionate about the placement and educational instability that foster youth experience. Shay's goal is to establish therapeutic treatment approaches and to implement policies to provide foster youth with resources to live successful and healthy lives.



CORTNEY JONES

U.S. Senate Committee on Finance (Majority)

FOSTER CARE: Texas

RESIDES: Texas

EDUCATION: Texas State University-San Marcos

AGE: 33

Cortney Jones has a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work from the University of Texas A&M-Commerce and a Master's Degree in Social Work with an emphasis on Administrative Leadership from Texas State University-San Marcos. Cortney has spent over 15 years advocating for foster youth and alumni of the foster care system around issues such as youth homelessness, post-secondary education, and youth voice. Cortney is passionate about addressing the disproportionality and disparities youth and families encounter with the Human Services System. While on Capitol Hill, Cortney hopes to gain first-hand experience to further her career goals of running for office and making sustainable changes in the foster care system.

NOOR KATHEM

U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen

FOSTER CARE: California

RESIDES: Arizona

EDUCATION: Arizona State University

AGE: 24

Noor is pursuing an undergraduate degree in Corporate Law at Arizona State University. Since arriving in the United States as an unaccompanied refugee minor (URM), Noor has been heavily involved in his community, and he spends his weekends volunteering with youth in his local community centers. While on Capitol Hill, Noor wants to raise awareness among policymakers about the issues URM's in the federal foster care system face, and to serve as an advocate for such youth.



AMBER LINDAMOOD

U.S. Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers

FOSTER CARE: Washington

RESIDES: Washington

EDUCATION: University of Washington

AGE: 24

Amber Lindamood is a graduate student at the University of Washington where she is pursuing a Master's Degree in Social Work with an emphasis on Children, Youth, and Families. Amber is passionate about implementing early prevention and intervention practices to promote the well-being of children. She hopes to collaborate with policymakers and incorporate these practices in the federal healthcare and education systems.



IXCHEL MARTINEZ

U.S. Representative Kevin McCarthy

FOSTER CARE: California, Washington

RESIDES: California

EDUCATION: University of Southern California

AGE: 28

Ixchel Martinez has a Master's Degree in Social Work from the University of Southern California and a double Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and Human Development from the University of California-Davis. Ixchel has worked to prevent child maltreatment and advocated for the provision of services to at-risk families in Sacramento County, California. Ixchel's personal experience in the foster care system and professional experiences have solidified her passion for improving the outcomes of disadvantaged children, youth, their families, and the communities they come from. Her life's mission is to improve the mental health and educational disparities in underserved communities.

ALISON MYERS

U.S. Senator Richard Durbin

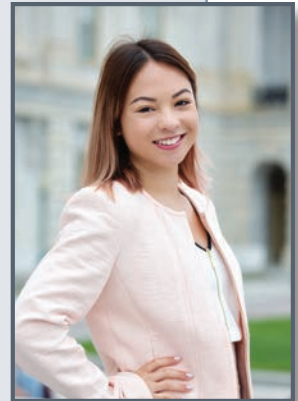
FOSTER CARE: Illinois

RESIDES: Illinois

EDUCATION: Illinois State University

AGE: 21

Alison Myers is an undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work at Illinois State University. Alison is passionate about improving the aging out process for foster youth exiting care. While on Capitol Hill, Alison plans to advocate for legislative changes that will improve the aging out process and provide transition-age youth with resources to prepare them for their futures.



TERRENCE SCRAGGINS

U.S. Senate Committee on Finance (Minority)

FOSTER CARE: Idaho

RESIDES: Idaho

EDUCATION: Boise State University

AGE: 29

Terrence Scraggins served four years in the United States Navy, and is currently pursuing a major in Social Work and a minor in Family Studies at Boise State University. Terry is interested in becoming a social worker and aspires to one day become a licensed foster parent. Terry is passionate about the rights of LGBTQI+ youth in foster care, and desires to educate policymakers and the public about the challenges LGBTQI+ youth face in the system and to implement solutions to address those challenges.



JORDAN SOSA

U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means (Majority)

FOSTER CARE: California

RESIDES: California

EDUCATION: California State University-Fullerton

AGE: 23

Jordan Sosa is a recent graduate of California State University-Fullerton, where he earned a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration with a minor in Human Services. Jordan developed a passion for child welfare through his personal experiences with the foster care system. As a member of California Youth Connection, Jordan has used his experience to draft bills and advocate for changes within the foster care system at the state level. His goal is to work for a non-profit that provides direct services to at-risk youth and foster youth, as well as to advocate for legislative and policy changes on a broader level.

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*Brittney, Calli, Shay, Cortney, Noor,
Amber, Ixchel, Alison, Terrence and Jordan*

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Notes

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