

Testimony of
Joe Kroll
Executive Director
North American Council on Adoptable Children

submitted to the

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support

on

Improving the Child Welfare System

March 2008

North American Council on Adoptable Children
970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106 • St. Paul, MN 55114
651.644.3036 • www.nacac.org
joekroll@aol.com

“The scary part was when I turned 18,” explains Jessica, a former foster youth from Pennsylvania. “I had nowhere to go. They told me, ‘When you turn 18, basically, you’re done.’”

For more than 30 years, the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) has been dedicated to the belief that every child like Jessica deserves a safe, permanent, loving family. We have been pleased to see so much attention given in recent years to the need to reform the federal child welfare system to ensure that this mission is accomplished. Several pieces of legislation would make a significant difference in the lives of children and youth who have spent far too long in foster care, and we are anxious to see child welfare reform legislation passed this year.

We strongly believe that reforms in the following areas would achieve lasting changes and would keep children from spending a day longer than necessary in foster care. It is too late to help Jessica, but thousands like her need Congressional action—and investment—today.

Fund Prevention and Reunification Efforts

While several pieces of child welfare reform legislation are pending before the U.S. Congress, there is no significant proposal that increases the federal investment in keeping families together.

The *Green Book* states: “It is generally agreed that it is in the best interests of children to live with their families. To this end, experts emphasize both the value of preventive and rehabilitative services and the need to limit the duration of foster care placements.”¹ Federal funding does not reflect this priority—90 percent of current federal funding can be used by states only after Title IV-E-eligible children have entered foster care or been adopted.²

Since so much of existing federal funding is dedicated to children who have entered care, states do not have sufficient resources to invest in supporting families to keep them together. In recent years, we have seen the percentage of foster children who reunite with their birth families go down—from 62 percent in 1998 to 54 percent in 2005.³

Washington State resident Stephanie has seen the value of reunification firsthand. Her mom, Brenda, was struggling with drug addiction when child protective services placed 11-year-old Stephanie and her four-year-old brother Danny in separate homes. “I cried myself to sleep every night wanting my brother to be with me,” says Stephanie. “I didn’t know where he was or if he was comfortable.”

While her children were in foster care, Brenda took full advantage of the extensive services available to her, including drug treatment, self-esteem classes, anger management, parenting

¹ U.S. House of Representative, Committee on Ways and Means. (2004). *2004 green book: Section 11,- child protection, foster care, and adoption assistance*. [Online]. Available: http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/multidb.cgi?WASdbName=108_green_book+2004+Green+Book+%28108th+Congress%29&WASqueryRule=%28%24WASqueryString%29+AND+%28reptype%3D%24sect+OR+reptype%3D%24sect1+OR+reptype%3D%24sect2%29&WASqueryString=duration+of+foster+care+placements&WASemplate=multidb_results.html&Submit.=Submit&WrapperTemplate=wmprints_wrapper.html&WASmaxHits=40. [Retrieved May 7, 2006].

² In FY 2006 the appropriation for Title IV-E foster care and adoption assistance programs is \$6.48 billion while the funding for Title IV-B Parts 1 and 2 (Safe and Stable Families Program) is only \$721.7 million.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *AFCARS report #10* (Preliminary FY 2005 estimates). [Online]. Available: http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13htm. [Retrieved February, 2007].

classes, and counseling. “When I was almost 13, I moved back in with my mom into an apartment,” Stephanie recalls. Once Stephanie was reunited with her mom and brother, her life got better. “I became more outgoing, I was more comfortable with myself, and my grades improved. I was in plays and musicals at church,” explains Stephanie. “If I could wish for anything it would be that our family could have gotten help sooner. I don’t know what life would have been like if I had stayed in foster care or been adopted, but I know if I didn’t have my family around me—my mom, my brother, my grandparents, and my cousins—I would be devastated. My family means everything to me.”

Brenda was able to receive the comprehensive services she needed, but her experience is not typical. An Urban Institute study found that states consistently spend little on services to prevent child abuse, efforts to prevent foster care placement, or services to reunify families.⁴ States have long expressed dissatisfaction with the level of substance abuse services available for parents. A recent survey of child welfare administrators found that substance abuse and poverty are the most critical problems facing families being investigated for child maltreatment.⁵ In some areas, substance abuse is an issue for one-third to two-thirds of the families involved in child welfare.⁶ Unfortunately, only 10 percent of child welfare agencies report that they can find drug treatment programs for clients who need it within 30 days.⁷ Almost no drug-addicted parents can access drug treatment programs where parents and children can stay together, and few are able to participate in comprehensive programs that address issues of parenting and housing along with substance abuse. For families dealing with poverty and housing issues, support is also hard to come by. As the National Center for Child Protection Reform notes, “Three separate studies since 1996 have found that 30 percent of America’s foster children could be safely in their own homes right now, if their birth parents had safe, affordable housing.”⁸

Recommendations: NACAC is glad to see that the Invest in KIDS Act includes an avenue for states to use IV-E funds for family support, preservation, and reunification services. Such flexibility and early investment will enable states to provide the right services for children, rather than encouraging placement in foster care to receive federal funds. The legislation, however, does not go far enough. The federal government must significantly increase its investment in Title IV-B Parts 1 and 2, in addition to providing states with increased flexibility in how they spend IV-E funds.

In addition, if states successfully reduce the use of foster care, they should be able to reinvest federal dollars saved into preventive and post-permanency services that support children after reunification, adoption, or guardianship. Currently, when a state reduces the number of IV-E eligible children in foster care, the federal government reduces its payment to the state. We recommend that the federal government provide states with an amount equal to the money saved

⁴ Urban Institute. (May 2006). *The cost of protecting vulnerable children V: Understanding state variation in child welfare financing*.

⁵ National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research. (2001). *Current trends in child abuse prevention, reporting, and fatalities: The 1999 fifty state survey*.

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *Blending perspectives and building common ground: A report to congress on substance abuse and child protection*.

⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *See complete citation above*.

⁸ National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. (2004). *Who is in “the system” and why*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.nccpr.org/newissues/5.html> [Retrieved May 7, 2006].

in Title IV-E maintenance payments, training, and administration. This would provide an incentive to keep or move children out of care, while also beginning to address the vast imbalance in federal funding.

Investing in at-risk families works. Using a IV-E waiver, Delaware demonstrated that investing in substance abuse treatment had positive outcomes for children: the project's children spent 14 percent less time in foster care than similar children who did not participate in the waiver, and total foster care costs were reduced.⁹ Indiana implemented a flexible funding IV-E waiver that resulted in fewer children entering foster care, shorter stays in care for those who did enter, and increased rates of family reunification.¹⁰ After reviewing similar projects, the Children's Bureau concluded, "These demonstration projects show that, when coupled with strong leadership and a willingness to deploy new practice tools, flexible funding can be an important catalyst toward achieving better outcomes for children and families."¹¹

Extend Title IV-E Coverage to All Children with Special Needs Adopted from Care

Currently, the federal government shares in a portion of adoption assistance costs only for children whose birth family income is below the 1996 Aid to Families with Dependent Children income standards. **Tying federal support for children to the income of a family from which all rights have been legally severed makes little sense.** All abused and neglected children need federal support, not just those born into very poor families. It's a simple matter of fairness.

Between 1998 and 2005, more than 380,000 foster children were adopted into loving, caring, permanent families. Adoption truly matters to children and youth—even teenagers. Lamarr from New York had been scarred by his foster care experiences, in which he and his siblings were separated and moved far too often. He recalls, "After a while, you'd forget you were in foster care. Then the agency or the foster care system says you have to move and the harsh reality that you're in foster care hits you.... My problem was that I connected with people too quick. I got close to people and that was a problem when I had to leave. Even if you feel like you can trust that person—and you can—when the time comes for you to leave, you know you are never going to see them again."

But everything changed for Lamarr when he was adopted as a teenager: "I gave my mother a hard time, because I am a hardheaded kid. But over time, I learned that when she was telling me these things, it's to help me learn from her. Now she's not only my parent, she is my best friend and I can talk to her. I can talk to her sons too. It's just a cool family."

⁹ U.S. General Accounting Office. (2002). *Recent legislation helps states focus on finding permanent homes for children but long-standing barriers remain*. Report to Congressional Requestors. [Online]. Available: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02585.pdf>. [Retrieved May 7, 2006].

¹⁰ U.S. Children's Bureau. (2007). *Profiles of the child welfare demonstration projects*. [Online]. Available: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/programs_fund/cw/waiver/2007/profiles_demo2007.pdf [Retrieved March 10, 2008].

¹¹ U.S. Children's Bureau. (2003). *Children's bureau express*, "Flexible Funding Demonstration Projects Show Promise." [Online]. Available: http://www.cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/printer_friendly.cfm?issue_id=2003-09&pri_iss=1 [Retrieved July 12, 2007].

But adoption is not a magic wand. Children who have been abused or neglected—and bounced from foster home to home—do not emerge unscathed. Many children have been in foster care too long, and have multiple special needs. The government has a moral obligation to support the families who make a long-term commitment to providing these children with a permanent home.

Adoption subsidies are a critical support for families who adopt children with special needs from foster care. Subsidies help strengthen these new families and enable many foster parents to adopt children already in their care by ensuring that they do not lose support as they move to adoption. Tina from California discovered the importance of support after adopting twins Patrick and Joseph several years ago. After they turned eight, the boys began to have serious outbursts of anger and destructive behavior, both at home and in school. Both are in special education classes. Although they can be sweet and loving, the boys need vigilant supervision. The adoption assistance the boys receive enables Tina to partially cover the cost of their child care, respite care, and mental health services. Although the payment does not completely cover these specialized services (let alone the day-to-day costs of childrearing), it is a vital support that helps keep the boys safely in their new family.

As a result of increases in adoptions and declining federal support that results from using a 12-year-old standard for income eligibility, states and localities now pay more to support children adopted from foster care. When states face budget crises (as many do now), they may seek to cut adoption assistance as a cost-savings measure. Several states are currently proposing cuts to adoption assistance. Research has shown that a state's provision of post-adoption support is sensitive to the availability of federal funding. Analysis reveals that IV-E adoption assistance "expands states' ability to offer adoption subsidies, rather than substituting for subsidies that would otherwise be supported by state funds."¹²

Recent state efforts demonstrate the need for rapid federal action on this issue. In 2005, Missouri enacted legislation that would have ended more than 1,000 existing state-funded adoption assistance agreements. Although a court found this particular law unconstitutional, other states may follow Missouri's example in an attempt to save funds. Such short-sighted policies will relegate more children to foster care, rather than helping them leave care to a permanent family.

A recent study by Barth et al. suggests that such adoption assistance cuts are not cost-effective: "[C]uts in subsidy amounts could reduce the likelihood of adoption and ultimately increase costs for foster care."¹³ In contrast, a new study suggests that a small increase in adoption assistance would result in increased adoptions, again saving money in the long run by reducing higher foster care costs.¹⁴ Two studies demonstrated that state-only adoption assistance payments are

¹² Dalberth et al. (2005). "Understanding Adoption Subsidies: An Analysis of AFCARS Data."

¹³ Barth, R., Lee, C., Wildfire, J., & Guo, S. (2006). A comparison of the governmental costs of long-term foster care and adoption. *Social service review*, 80(1).

¹⁴ Eschelbach Hansen, M., & Hansen, B. (2006). The economics of adoption of children from foster care. *Child welfare*, 85(3).

lower than payments supported by IV-E funds.¹⁵ Economic analysis also shows that the rate of adoption from foster care is strongly correlated with the *level* of adoption subsidy support.¹⁶

In the long run, adoption—even well-supported adoption—saves money. The Barth et al. study showed that the 50,000 children adopted each year save the government from \$1 billion to \$6 billion, when compared to maintaining those children in long-term foster care. Savings result from reduced administrative costs, medical courts, court expenses, compared to the costs of seeking adoptive families and providing adoption assistance.¹⁷

Recommendations: NACAC has long advocated for an elimination of the link between birth parent’s income and eligibility for Title IV-E adoption assistance. State *and federal* assistance should be required to ensure support after adoption for every abused and neglected child—not just every child born into a poor family. While we support the de-linking provisions in the Invest in KIDS Act, NACAC is a strong supporter of the Adoption Equality Act (HR 4091/S 1462), which would extend Title IV-E adoption assistance to every child with special needs adopted from foster care without changing federal reimbursement rates. Because the Adoption Equality Act allows for reinvestment of saved funds, states can enhance the services they provide to support families after permanency or prevent foster care placements altogether.

The Invest in KIDS Act and the Adoption Equality Act would also remedy a geographic barrier for foster children who need families. By eliminating the IV-E link, Congress would ensure that all children with special needs adopted from care are eligible for Medicaid. Currently, states are allowed—but not required—to extend Medicaid to children who receive state-funded adoption assistance and to provide reciprocity to non-IV-E children adopted into their states. Because some states (Iowa, Illinois, New York, Nevada, and others) do not choose to offer Medicaid to these children, the children face barriers to interstate placements and lose needed medical coverage if their families move to another state. Even if de-linking legislation is not passed, NACAC encourages Congress to require Medicaid coverage be extended to all children adopted from foster care so they do not face barriers to interstate placements or so their families are not prevented from leaving their home state.

Extend Title IV-E Coverage to All Foster Children

Extending Title IV-E assistance to all children adopted from foster care is just one step in ensuring a true federal/state/tribal partnership for vulnerable children. The following changes to Title IV-E funding should also be pursued:

Enable Direct Title IV-E Agreements with Tribes

Enacted in 1980, the Foster Care and Adoption Assistance Act did not address the fact that thousands of American Indian children receive child welfare services through their tribal governments. State governments were the only eligible recipients of Title IV-E funds. As a

¹⁵ Mary Eschelbach Hansen. (2006). “Title IV-E Claims and Adoption Assistance Payments”; Dalberth et al. (2005). *See complete citation above.*

¹⁶ Eschelbach Hansen, M., & Hansen, B. (2006). *See complete citation above.*

¹⁷ Barth et al. (2006). *See complete citation above.*

result, American Indian children under the jurisdiction of tribal courts could not receive Title IV-E services. These children live in communities with some of the greatest needs in the United States. This oversight has essentially made a class of children ineligible for federal entitlement services simply because of where they live.

As a recent General Accountability Office report shows, Native American children are dramatically over-represented in foster care in many states.¹⁸ Legislation that helps tribes support families, provide foster care services, and find permanent families for foster children and youth is critically important.

Currently, to receive federal Title IV-E funding, tribes must negotiate separate contracts with the states in which they are located. Direct funding would enable tribes to better offer permanency services for the children in their care—just as states do for the children under their guardianship and custody. With the current patchwork of funds that tribes use, continuity of services is almost impossible and it is challenging to achieve the goals of safety, permanence, and well-being for children and youth in their care.

Enabling tribes to more easily support families by giving them direct access to funding would make a tremendous difference to children. As Tracy King, an experienced foster parent and tribal leader explains, “Without the help of spiritual traditional counseling, no amount of money can help Indian kids when they are lost and struggling.” Tracy’s words are an important reminder that tribe members, not state agencies, can best provide this kind of support to Native young people in foster care.

Recommendation: NACAC supports the Invest in KIDS Act’s provision—like the Tribal Foster Care and Adoption Act (HR 4688/S 1956)—that would make it possible for tribes to establish independent foster care and adoption programs, and therefore provide culturally competent services to the many Native American children and youth in care. We encourage the passage of this legislation.

Eliminate the Link between IV-E and AFDC Standards for Foster Care

Under current law, a foster child can access federal Title IV-E support only if his birth family was poor enough to be eligible for the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program as it existed in 1996. More than 12 years old, this AFDC standard has never been adjusted for inflation. Because of this so-called lookback, thousands of abused and neglected children no longer receive federal support that they need. Between 1998 and 2004, an estimated 35,000 fewer foster children became eligible for Title IV-E support. The significant decrease in Title IV-E-eligible children has translated into an estimated \$1.9 billion loss in federal funding to the states.¹⁹ Since states must shoulder the cost for all foster children, regardless of their parents’ income, diminished federal support adversely affects other service programs—including family support and preservation services, programs to safely reunite children with birth families, and efforts to find new adoptive or guardianship families.

¹⁸ Government Accountability Office. (2007). *African American children in foster care: Additional HHS assistance needed to help states reduce the proportion in care.*

¹⁹ Kids Are Waiting. (2007). *Time for reform: Fix the foster care lookback.*

By linking federal foster care support to the defunct AFDC program, the federal government also wastes precious time and money as child welfare staff spend hours tracking down income data for eligibility purposes. Maine, for example, has a staff of 12 who do nothing but determine IV-E eligibility for foster children. Then, the federal government must invest significant time and money auditing states to see if they have done the claiming properly. These resources would be far better spent protecting children and ensuring that they exit foster care to permanent families instead of leaving care at 18 with no family safety net. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services itself concluded, “it is not at all clear that the time and effort spent tracking eligibility criteria results in better outcomes for children.”²⁰

Recommendations: NACAC applauds the Invest in KIDS Act for proposing to eliminate the link between a family’s income and Title IV-E. However, NACAC would prefer to see a proposal that does not adjust the federal participation rate. As cited above, states have lost almost \$2 billion in potential federal support due to the AFDC lookback,²¹ and have had to invest increasing amounts of their own funds in child welfare services in recent years.²² De-linking alone—without significant investment in child and family services—will still leave states at a serious disadvantage as they try to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and families.

The Partnership for Children and Families Act (HR 4207) would eliminate the outdated AFDC income eligibility link while maintaining current federal participation rates. HR 4207 would also allow states that reduce foster care populations below a baseline to reinvest saved funds in other child welfare services that would keep families together, and help children exit foster care to reunification, guardianship, or adoption. NACAC encourages passage of legislation that increases the federal investment in child welfare, even as it de-links Title IV-E funding.

Implement Federally Supported Subsidized Guardianship

Today, nearly one-quarter of foster children are cared for by grandparents or other relatives.²³ Almost 20,000 of these children cannot return to their birth families and have been with their relatives for at least a year.²⁴ These stable, loving kin families are a perfect permanent resource for many foster children, but the children remain stuck in foster care simply because adoption is not the right choice for their family.

Anne’s grandsons entered foster care several years ago in California. Anne has spent years helping them recover from the trauma of their early lives. “[One] had night terrors that lasted until he was about eight. He was sleeping, but he screeched for four to five hours a night. All I

²⁰ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. (2005). ASPE Issue Brief, *Federal foster care financing: How and why the current funding structure fails to meet the needs of the child welfare field*. [Online]. Available: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/05/fc-financing-ib/>. [Retrieved March 1, 2008].

²¹ Kids Are Waiting. (2007). *See full citation above*.

²² Urban Institute. (2006). *See full citation above*.

²³ Generations United. (2006). *All children deserve a permanent home: Subsidized guardianships as a common sense solution for children in long-term relative foster care*.

²⁴ Children and Family Research Center. (2004). *Family ties: Supporting permanence for children in safe and stable foster care with relatives and other caregivers*.

could do was sit and hold him,” explains Anne. Anne believes the other boy was sexually abused, and he has serious learning disabilities and emotional issues.

Although she is committed to caring for the boys forever, Anne didn't want to adopt them because they are—and will always be—her grandsons. “I would have loved to have taken the boys out of foster care and become their guardian,” explains Anne. “But I could only have done that if the boys would have been able to continue to receive support for their special needs. I couldn't have afforded to pay for all those services on my own.” So, the boys remain in foster care, and the family contends with court visits and caseworker oversight.

For children like Anne's grandsons who remain in foster care, life is unnecessarily complicated—they cannot sleep over a friend's house without social worker approval. They cannot receive routine medical care without the government getting involved. Children like these need the permanency option of federally supported guardianship.

Recommendation: Federal waivers have proven the efficacy of subsidized guardianship. In the nine years since Illinois implemented its guardianship program, 9,596 children have left the state's foster care system to live with legal, supported guardianship families.²⁵ While waivers have allowed states to experiment with needed innovations, they are temporary and waiver authority no longer exists for those states who want it. We now need subsidized guardianship to be an approved permanency option, included in the Title IV-E program like adoption assistance. Children in stable foster placements with relatives and other committed caregivers would benefit from greater federal support for guardianship, allowing children to leave care, eliminate costly caseworker visits, and reduce unnecessary court oversight. A federally supported guardianship program could help almost 20,000 children leave foster care to a permanent family *right now*. Thousands more could be served each year in the future.

One caution should be noted in implementing subsidized guardianship, however. Both the Kinship Caregiver Support Act (HR 2188/S 661) and the Invest in KIDS Act (HR 5466) would give states the option to set guardianship subsidies equal to foster care payments *or* to adoption assistance rates. Currently about one-third of states have adoption assistance rates that are lower than foster care rates (in Minnesota, for example, the base adoption assistance rate is about 50 percent of the foster care maintenance rate). If states choose to match the higher foster care rate for guardians, it will create a disincentive to adoption. Preliminary results of a Minnesota waiver that set equal foster care, adoption assistance, and guardianship assistance rates show that these equal rates resulted in increased permanency and reduced length of stays for foster children.²⁶

Even with equal rates, a recent study showed that the foster care rate falls far short of meeting the needs of children who have disabilities. The study found that 49 states fall short of adequate reimbursement to families for caring for foster children, and that 23 states should raise their rates by 50 to 100 percent and 5 states should more than double their rates.²⁷

²⁵ Personal communication with Leslie Cohen. (March 2007). Children and Family Research Center.

²⁶ Minnesota Permanency Demonstration. (2007). “Title IV-E Child Welfare Waiver Project, Second Annual Progress Report.”

²⁷ Children's Rights. (2007). *Hitting the MARC: Establishing foster care minimum adequate rates for children*. Online. Available: <http://www.childrensrights.org/pdfs/MARC/MARCTechReport.pdf>. [Retrieved March 4, 2008].

NACAC strongly advises that federal legislation require that foster care, adoption assistance, and guardianship rates be equal *and adequate*, so that families can choose adoption or guardianship based on the best interests of the child, rather than on financial need.

Create Incentives for All Forms of Safe Permanence

The adoption incentive program was a necessary step to encourage the child welfare system to focus on a permanency option that, 10 years ago, was often overlooked. Too many children, especially older children and youth, spent their young lives languishing in the instability of foster care. Now, however, there is a need to provide incentives for all forms of safe permanence, rather than rewarding states for making one particular permanency choice. A 2002 Government Accountability Office report found that one of states' primary concerns about the program was that it might convey the impression that adoption was the best plan in all cases.²⁸

The ultimate goal of the federal child welfare program is to ensure every child's safety, permanency, and well-being. It is time to design an incentive program that rewards states for achieving all of these outcomes, rather than singling out one form of permanency. The federal government's goal—and each state's goal—should be to achieve the best permanency option for a particular child in as short a time as possible.

Recommendations: NACAC encourages the committee to consult with leading child welfare researchers to design an incentive program that rewards the following types of outcomes and mitigates any unintended consequences that could be created by an incentive program:

- Safe reductions in the use of foster care
- Safe and permanent reunification that does not result in re-entry into care
- Adoptive and guardianship placements that do not disrupt or dissolve
 - Additional adoption/guardianship incentives could be provided for children who have been in care for two years or more, youth who are aged nine or older, and sibling groups who are placed together
- Reductions in the percentage of youth aging out of care

To ensure that the incentive program rewards ongoing progress, we also recommend that the baseline formulas be changed to focus on a three-year average in each of the areas above, and to use a rate of permanency rather than the simple number of permanent placements made. By using a rate, the system would continue to reward states for achieving increased safe, permanent placements even if their overall foster care population went down.

States should also be required to reinvest incentive funds in post-permanency services and should be permitted at least two full years after funds are awarded to spend them. Typically, states are awarded incentive funds in the last days of the fiscal year, and have only until the following September 30 to spend them. Allowing a longer time frame in which to spend the money costs the federal treasury nothing, but allows for thoughtful allocation of resources.

²⁸ Congressional Research Service. (2004). *Child welfare: Implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.pennyhill.com/aboutcrs.php>.

Improve the Child Welfare Workforce

A 2006 GAO report noted that states' failure to achieve federal child welfare goals was partly due to long-standing workforce issues related to the average number of cases per worker. Thirty-five states identified workforce recruitment and retention as one of the three most difficult issues to resolve.²⁹ Most states reported taking action to remedy these long standing issues but without additional resources for workforce development and training, these efforts will not be enough.

Hiring, retaining, and training a qualified, culturally competent and diverse workforce is critical to ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of children receiving child welfare and adoption services. Research shows a connection between caseworker turnover and multiple placements, longer lengths of stay, and lower rates of permanency for children in foster care.³⁰ Improving the caseload ratios for staff allows workers more time to collaborate with families, coordinate services with other agencies, conduct relative searches, and locate and support better permanency options for children.

Recommendations: NACAC applauds the attention to workforce issues in the Invest in KIDS Act. Such an investment is only the beginning, however. Beyond improving the capabilities of individual workers, the federal government needs to provide additional funds to help states implement programs and services that keep families together, help children return home from foster care more quickly, and provide needed support to adoptive and guardian families.

Conclusion

We began with the story of one Jessica, and will end with another. This Jessica spent her youth in foster care in Michigan and also aged out with no support. Now in her 20s, Jessica is a peer facilitator for foster youth. She explains, "This job helped me find myself, because I didn't know what I was going to do once I transitioned out. I didn't know how to apply to college. I didn't know how to find a car or an apartment, or open up a bank account. I help youth who are leaving care, but what many of them really need is a family to help take care of them."

It is time for the federal government to take action so that no more young people like Jessica age out of foster care without a family. Children and youth need supportive services, but most of all they need a permanent, loving family—whether their birth family or a new family formed through guardianship or adoption. The proposed laws discussed above would help ensure that more children find such forever families—although passage of these bills is only the beginning of a journey toward ensuring all children and youth have safe, permanent families. There is a need for greater federal investment—of both money and attention—in meeting the needs of vulnerable children and their families.

²⁹ Government Accountability Office. (2006). *Additional federal action could help states address challenges in providing services to children and families.*

³⁰ Children's Defense Fund and Children's Rights, Inc. (2007). *Promoting child welfare workforce improvements through federal policy changes.*