



Dear Members of Congress:

We, the undersigned organizations, represent networks of foster parents and kinship caregivers who are caring for children across our country. We are joined by other organizations that share our commitment to the safety and well-being of children in foster care.

With this letter, we share our unique point of view about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of children and youth in foster care and their families. The timing of our letter is particularly notable given that this is National Foster Care Month. For more than 30 years, May has been a time to recognize the importance of our country's foster care safety net and its vital role in the lives of children, youth and families.

This year, National Foster Care Month arrives as our nation battles a global pandemic that poses serious health threats and has disrupted the lives of all families, with unique impacts on families caring for children in foster care. At this important juncture, we have the opportunity to set and enforce smart policies that will make an immediate and positive impact. As Congress continues its work responding to the heavy toll of the pandemic, we hope you will consider input on some of foster and kinship families' most significant needs.

- **Children and families involved in child welfare and the professionals who support them need access to rapid testing along with other first responders.** In-person connections are essential to foster care, ranging from initial investigations of child abuse or neglect, to visits between children in foster care and their families, to children joining foster families. As COVID-19 testing is expanded, all families (birth, foster, kinship and adoptive) and workers in child welfare need access to rapid testing to ensure the continuity of these vital in-person services.
- **Foster families and kinship caregivers need economic security so they are able to continue their caregiving.** Like others, many foster and kin caregivers are experiencing job losses or reductions in hours created by the pandemic. Kinship caregivers often rely on their retirement savings to meet the children's needs, and those savings are plummeting. Foster and kin caregivers are raising children who have experienced trauma and have resulting special needs, and the declining economic conditions threaten their ability to continue caregiving. Some states, including Oklahoma, Kansas, Vermont, South Carolina and New Mexico, are providing short-term supplemental financial assistance to help families. Supplemental payments to foster, adoptive, and kinship parents are needed in all states to ensure these families can meet basic needs.
- **Families and children need timely access to physical and mental health care for children and youth in foster care and those who leave foster care to reunification, adoption and guardianship.** These services have always been a significant need, and now more than ever

children, youth and families need access to these services. However, there are increased barriers resulting from the pandemic. We must ensure that health care providers remain available to serve this population through adequate payment for in-person and telehealth visits, and direct financial support to keep pediatric providers open. It is also time to spur innovation and scale approaches, such as telemedicine and mobile crisis supports, that can help.

- **Foster, adoptive, and kinship family recruitment, training and licensing should be a national priority today and in the future.** This is critically important to ensure that children have the healing benefits that stable, family-based care offers and avoid unnecessary placements in group facilities. Experts in the field project increasing numbers of children who will need foster care, pointing to an uptick in the factors that contribute to children entering foster care. Federal leadership can help state and local agencies implement best practices during the pandemic and beyond, such as the use of mobile fingerprinting units and integration of effective online training for new families.
- **Families and workers need technology tools, including cell phones, laptops and internet access.** These tools are necessary for children to connect to their families, social workers, and essential health and mental health services. They are also needed for children to successfully participate in schools. Technology tools should become required resources provided to every foster and kinship family and worker.
- **Children who have special needs require extra support with home schooling.** Many children in foster, adoptive, and kinship families participate in special education programs. These children and their families need additional supports to ensure that they can successfully build knowledge and skills without the in-person support that is often so critical to children's ability to learn.
- **Foster families, adoptive, and kinship caregivers need peer support.** Given the challenges children in foster care face, these families benefit from the advice and emotional support of others in similar situations. Well-supported peer support programs, such as those in Missouri and Illinois, and virtual kinship caregiver support groups, such as those in South Carolina, are effective ways of preventing disruptions in placements and helping families succeed.

This has been a challenging time for everyone involved in child welfare. We are heartened by the hard work and creativity of state and local leaders and front-line staff as we work together to adjust to this new reality. We also applaud the leadership of the US Children's Bureau, which has engaged stakeholders in listening sessions and has issued a series of letters to child welfare leaders addressing key topics. This leadership provides much-needed direction to child welfare agencies as they make the necessary adaptations to services.

It's our hope that Congress will take action to ensure that resources are available to foster, kinship and adoptive families who are caring for our children and youth. We look forward to your continued leadership and support.