

FIRST FOCUS: CHILD WELFARE

ADDRESSING DISPARITIES IN CHILD WELFARE

First Focus is a bipartisan advocacy organization that is committed to making children and their families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. Children's health, education, family economics, child welfare, and child safety are the five core issue areas around which First Focus is working to promote bipartisan policy solutions.



Minority populations - specifically African-Americans and American Indian/Alaskan Natives (AI/AN) - are over-represented in our foster care system. Although African-American children make up less than 15% of the U.S. child population, they represent nearly 37% of the foster care population. A report recently released by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago found that African American infants are nearly three times more likely to be placed in foster care than white infants. A 2007 GAO report responded to growing concern about the over-representation of African American children in foster care, highlighting the need for assistance to states in reducing the number of children in care. The report identified several factors that contribute to the over-representation of African-Americans in care, including lack of access to substance abuse treatment and auxiliary services, including subsidized housing.

Close to 10,000 AI/AN children are currently in the foster care system, often representing a disproportionate number of kids in care. In fact, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) reports that in some states - including Alaska and South Dakota - AI/AN children represent over 45% of substantiated cases of child abuse.

Although tribal communities are over-represented in the child welfare system, they lack access to critical federal funding, services and supports.

FIRST FOCUS'S POSITION

The lack of access to resources contributes to an overrepresentation of specific populations in the child welfare system. In our advocacy efforts, First Focus intends to support policies and programs that address existing disparities in access to care, treatment and services for minority and under-represented populations.

◆ **Improving Access to Substance Abuse Treatment.** Considerable research supports the strong link between substance abuse and contact with the child welfare system. In fact, in over 50% of all child welfare cases, parental substance use is a major factor - and in some parts of the country, the rate may be as high as 80%. AI/AN families are markedly impacted by the problem of substance abuse. The growing use of meth in tribal communities highlights the need for effective and accessible substance abuse treatment for this population. The 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health

report indicates that 1.7% of AI/ANs report using meth in the past year, second only to Native Hawaiians in usage. In contrast, fewer than 1% of White, non-Hispanics report using meth in the past year - yet they account for over 72% of those entering treatment while AI/ANs represent less than 3% of those entering treatment. We believe it is essential to improve access to effective substance abuse treatment for AI/ANs and other vulnerable populations.

In addition, First Focus will advocate for additional resources for tribes to provide substance abuse treatment for parents involved in the child welfare system. For instance, First Focus will work on ensuring that tribes have access to implementation grants in SAMHSA's Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program. Currently, urban Indian organizations can receive mental health planning grants but cannot receive follow-up grant funding.

◆ **Improving Access to Federal Child Welfare Funding Streams.** Unfortunately, under current law, tribal nations do not have direct access to federal SSA Title IV-E Foster Care and Adoption Assistance funds. Instead, tribes must develop negotiated agreements with states to access these funds. First Focus advocates for providing tribes with direct access to the largest source of federal funding for child welfare. We support the Tribal Foster Care and Adoption Access Act, which is critical to enhancing the capacity of Indian tribes to respond to the needs of vulnerable Indian children and families. Providing tribes with equal access to SSA Title IV-E funds is essential to ensuring that tribal agencies have the capacity to provide critical supports and services to Indian children and families in need.

◆ **Expanding Kinship Care Efforts.** We support efforts to expand kinship care and provide critical support for the growing number of kinship caregivers in this country. Kinship care arrangements are more common for minority populations and we support efforts to increase funding and improve access to this critical placement option for children in foster care.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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