

# FIRST FOCUS: CHILD WELFARE

## IMPROVING THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

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.

Child abuse is a devastating social problem. Each year, child protective service agencies receive nearly 3,000,000 reports of abuse, and 1,000,000 are substantiated. Sadly, statistics likely underestimate abuse prevalence rates given that many reported cases of actual abuse are not verified and countless other cases never come to the attention of protective service agencies.

Abuse has dire consequences for the developing child, often leading to deficits in interpersonal relationships, affect regulation, and self-development, as well as increased rates of multiple psychiatric diagnoses. While not all abused children develop difficulties, many do experience a chronic course of psychopathology, with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and behavioral disorders commonly reported in victimized children and adults.

Since the authorization of the very first federal grants for child welfare services in the 1930s, states have made considerable strides in addressing the needs of children and families entering the system, but we need to do more. A critical first step would be to make improvements to the existing child welfare financing structure to ensure flexibility in the use of the primary source of federal dollars dedicated to child welfare services – SSA Title IV-E. Changes to the eligibility policy – lookback- for Title IV-E funds are long overdue. States should also be able to directly access Title IV-E funds for prevention, early intervention and post-permanency services, subsidized guardianship, and case worker training & retention. Doing so will ensure that states have the resources they need to adequately care for the countless children and families that walk through their agency doors each day.

### FIRST FOCUS'S POSITION

Below we've identified our child welfare policy agenda – and highlighted recommendations we believe are essential to improving our existing system of care.

- ◆ **Expanding Kinship Care & Subsidized Guardianship Efforts.** According to the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), nearly a third of all children in foster care live with a relative. As the fastest growing form of placement, kinship care shows promise. Data suggest that children adjust well and thrive in the care of relatives. According to child welfare professionals, children are generally better off in the care of relatives, have more stable placements, and maintain better contact with parents. Also, kinship care arrangements are more common for Latino and African American children. More than one-third of all Latino children in foster care are living with relatives. Also, African American children are overrepresented in the child welfare system and typically have a lower rate of adoption than other children – making kinship guardianship an important permanency option for this population.

Kinship families need our support. Over half of kids in kinship care live in families with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line. Although the Adoption and Safe Families Act recognizes guardianship as an avenue for achieving permanence for children exiting foster care, the federal government does not fund guardianships to the same extent as traditional adoption assistance and long-term foster care. Instead, existing subsidized guardianship programs in 39 states and District of Columbia are financed through a combination of federal and state resources. Enhancing services, training and federal financial assistance for kinship care is critical to ensuring that our system of care adequately meets the needs of our most vulnerable children.

- ◆ **Ensuring Continuity in Care for Teens Aging Out.** The range of services and supports available to children who age out of the foster care system varies considerably state to state. Most teens aging out of care receive minimal services, and feel abandoned at a time when they need a great deal of guidance and support. In 2005, over 24,000 teens left foster care at the age of 18. Sadly, the outlook for these kids is fairly grim. One in four will be incarcerated within the first two years after leaving the system, and over one-fifth will become homeless at some point. Only 58 percent will obtain a high school degree at age 19 – compared to 87 percent of non-foster kids. These teens are also more likely to experience serious mental health problems and to be involved in the juvenile justice system. Teens aging out of foster care are especially vulnerable. We need to be responsive to the unique needs of this population, and work to improve services and ensure continuity in care for teens in transition.

- ◆ **Improving Caseworker Training & Retention.** In a 2006 GAO survey, state administrators ranked caseworker recruitment and retention a serious problem in the child welfare system. This is largely due to high caseloads, burdensome administrative responsibilities and problems with caseworker supervision. In many areas of the country, caseworkers carry caseloads of more than double the standard established by CWLA. The annual turnover in child welfare agencies has been estimated to be as high as 40 percent, and the average tenure of a social worker is just 2 years. Often, caseworkers are shifted to supervisory positions in about 3 years – and inadequately trained or prepared to handle the added responsibilities. We need to expand resources and supports for caseworkers – to ensure that each is equipped to face the day to day challenges of working in the foster care system.



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MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY