

Fostering Adoptions Act will improve life for thousands of youths

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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May is National Foster Care Month and this year is a good time to reflect on the progress we can make in improving the lives of children and youths in foster care by implementing the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections Act). This important new federal law, approved last fall with broad bipartisan support, will help hundreds of thousands of children and youths who have been abused and neglected. It's now up to all of us to see that states implement it so that it truly benefits young people across the country.

Nothing matters more to children than the love and security a family provides, and this new law offers family connections to some of our nation's most vulnerable children. More than 500,000 children in America are in foster care at any given time; about one-fourth of them are being cared for by relatives. Each year, nearly 130,000 children in foster care are waiting to be adopted, and 44 percent of them entered care before age six. More than 26,000 older youths leave foster care each year—most at 18—without being returned home or adopted. Compared to children and youths who have not been in foster care, young people in care are more likely to become homeless, unemployed or to be incarcerated.

They are more likely to have physical, developmental and mental health challenges. The Fostering Connections Act offers them new hope. It promotes family connections by helping children being raised by grandparents and other relative caregivers link up with the supports they need. It also helps children who have lived with relatives in foster care to remain permanently with them outside of foster care when returning home or adoption are not options. The new law requires that siblings live together in foster care whenever possible and offers greater federal support to states to increase adoptions of older youths and children with disabilities or other special needs from foster care.

The Fostering Connections Act offers other important new opportunities for older youths in care, who now are often forced out of foster care at age 18 with few resources to help them transition to adulthood. It helps them remain in foster care longer while they are in school or working, and engages them in planning for their futures. It promotes educational stability for children in foster care by requiring they be in school, by minimizing moves from school to school, and improves health outcomes by promoting better coordination of health care. And it increases services and protections for American Indian children by giving Indian tribes direct access for the first time to federal support for foster care, guardianship and adoption assistance. Federal support is expanded for training of private agency staff, attorneys and others representing abused and neglected children.

All of us should monitor how this new law and new federal support is benefitting children being raised by relatives and in foster care. Many of the new protections are now in effect. A number of states have issued policies requiring notice to grandparents and other relatives when a child is removed from his home and requiring that siblings be placed together in foster care or be helped to stay connected. In some states, education and child welfare agencies are working together to ensure that children in foster care are attending school and can stay in their original school when they enter care or move to a new foster home or group care setting.

Nearly all the states that previously offered subsidies to relative guardians who commit to caring

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permanently for children they had cared for in foster care are considering new legislation. Find out what is happening in your state and how children are benefitting. These are tight fiscal times but many of these new provisions are cost-effective in the short- and long-term.

Everybody can play a role even if you aren't a foster parent. You can serve as a mentor for a child or youth in foster care, or work with others to provide scholarships for children in care to be able to participate in extracurricular activities or for graduating youths to go on to college. There is always a special role for the faith community, which can come together to support families in their congregations and communities who do provide foster care and grandparents and other relatives who have taken on full-time responsibility for the care of children to help keep them out of foster care. Ask your own state where there are volunteer opportunities or other chances for you to become involved. Children need all of us.