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Fostering Connections Act Promises New Opportunities for Child Welfare Reform



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National Foster Care Month

View from Washington



by Kathi Crowe, Executive Director, National Foster Care Coalition

Each May, as most Americans enjoy the warming weather, bright flowers, and other symbols long associated with spring, child advocates focus the nation's attention to a more sobering reality – the nearly half-million children in foster care in the United States.

May was first designated as National Foster Care Month in 1988, when the National Foster Parent Association urged former Senator Strom Thurmond to introduce a resolution to recognize the valuable contributions of foster parents. More recent campaigns have highlighted the needs of children and youth in care, particularly of the 26,000 youth who age out of the system each year without a permanent, loving family.

Recruiting and retaining loving foster, kinship, and adoptive families has never been more urgent than during this time of economic downturn. Biological families who previously required services are facing even greater hardship, resulting in increased demand on an already stressed child welfare system. Job loss and foreclosure have touched foster and kinship families, making it difficult for them to care for foster children.

Perhaps nothing awakens people to the realities of foster care more than hearing directly from young people who share their firsthand experiences. The heart-wrenching stories of former foster youth put a face to the facts and figures, magnifying the issues and prompting policy leaders and the public to actively engage in foster care reform.

Hearing these personal stories engaged then First Lady Hillary Clinton to support the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. Recently, young people's testimony at congressional hearings, briefings, and countless office visits, combined with compelling outcomes data and passionate advocacy by child welfare professionals, served as the drumbeat for reform that led to the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

To commemorate National Foster Care Month, members of the National Foster Care Coalition, in partnership with Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services, and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, joined together in Washington, D.C., the first week of May for a series of events to raise awareness of the needs of foster children and their families. The events also drew participation by young alumni of foster care, foster and adoptive parents, birth parents, relative caregivers, and CASA volunteers from across the country.

The first event, a journalist roundtable moderated by Marianne Bichsel of Casey Family Programs, and Ellis Cose, columnist and contributing editor for *Newsweek* magazine and producer of "Against the Odds," was held May 4 at the National Press Club. Panelists included Rob Geen, senior fellow at the Annie E. Casey Foundation; JooYeun Chang, policy director for Casey Family Programs; and foster care alumni Christopher Andrade, Josh Griggs, and Trista Miller. Grandmother Sue Avery and biological parent Mike Mohn also added their perspectives.

On May 5, the National Foster Care Coalition, assisted by some of its members, California Youth Connection, Casey Family Programs, FosterClub, Inc., National CASA, and the National Foster Parent Association, offered an intensive daylong advocacy training. Topics included the legislative process, strategic sharing, and discussion of key policy issues.

The training was followed by a Congressional briefing that included introductory remarks by Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Washington), chairman of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support. The event also featured opening remarks by Joo Yeun Chang, public policy director for Casey Family Programs, and presentations by panelists Geen, and alumni Andrade, Griggs, Miller, Lupe Ortiz-Tovar, and Maggie Roberts. A reception honoring Senators Max Baucus (D-Montana) and Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), Rep. McDermott, and former Rep. Jerry Weller with 2009 Legislative Champion Awards for their leadership on comprehensive child welfare reform followed the briefing.

The events drew attention to the needs of the nation's most vulnerable children, their families, and the efforts currently underway to strengthen child welfare services. The National Foster Care Coalition is committed to partnering with policy leaders and engaging the public in improving the lives of children, youth, and families touched by the foster care system. American families are struggling and, more than ever, our most vulnerable children need our help.