



Voice

Spring 2005 Volume Six Issue Two

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Count
for a Lifetime*

May is National Foster Care Month

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Let's Talk Entitlements for Children

View from Washington



by Robin Nixon, Director,
National Foster Care
Coalition

An entitlement is a federal program, such as Social Security or unemployment, that guarantees a certain level of benefits to persons or other entities who meet the requirements set by the program.

– *Glossary of Congressional and Legislative Terms*

While the White House and Congress say that federal spending must go down, advocacy organizations are in turmoil over the number and extent of cuts to human services programs.

Our representatives in Washington, D.C. created entitlement programs because there are some issues, such as the welfare of children, which are important to us as a society, and as a nation, and we agree to pay for these programs according to human need. Yet if a program is not an entitlement, then it must fend for itself among a wide range of other discretionary programs, including the ever-increasing number of pet projects submitted by individual legislators (a.k.a. pork).

We create, through national consensus, programs that protect children, strengthen families and help to ensure that every child can grow up safely in a family. Such programs deserve our particular attention and protection. Most of us can easily relate this to our own family's financial situation. If money is tight at home, what or who becomes the priority for any expenditures? The kids. Most of us would sacrifice just about any



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comfort or material possession to protect our children and ensure their future well-being. Behind all the legislative jargon, committee meetings, and wheeling and dealing in the halls of government, that's the reason we want laws to ensure that services for kids are prioritized and funded. And Congress knows it.

It took me about half a day of research and phone calls to find an actual definition of entitlement (thanks to Mary Lee Allen at the Children's Defense Fund). I knew there was something deeply and personally meaningful to me, as a citizen and a mom, about entitlements for children and families, but I couldn't quite wrap my mind around it in a logical way. When we advocate for programs these days, we tend to focus on the very concrete (quantitative, performance-based and researched) aspects of their worthiness. Is the program effective? Does it reach an adequate number of people to justify the dollars spent? Is the funding administered competently? How many children (youth, families ...) are being served by the program? We feel as though saying "it's the right thing to do" just doesn't carry any weight with policymakers. In the case of entitlements, however, pointing out that they exist because they are the right thing to do may be the most meaningful thing we can say.